

EXAMINING LEADERSHIP-AS-PRACTICE IN A RURAL SK SCHOOL

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By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore leadership-as-practice during the implementation of a school improvement initiative in a k-12 Saskatchewan school. Using a practice lens, which characterizes leadership as a socially constituted phenomenon, my objective was to examine the interactions of the rural school actors as they implemented the initiative to understand how leadership-as-practice unfolded as they worked together. Specifically I wanted to observe: 1) how the practice of leadership was enacted in this rural school; 2) how the factors in the socio-material context influenced the practice of leadership, and; 3) how the activities of leadership-as-practice enabled the successful implementation of the school improvement initiative.

A qualitative case study was undertaken to study leadership-as-practice in this rural school. Data were collected over a three-month period incorporating non-participant observation of five team meetings over the school term, semi-structured interviews of 12 participants who worked within the initiative, and document analysis of project documents and meeting minutes.

The key findings from this inquiry revealed that leadership-as-practice in this rural school unfolded in a collective and collaborative manner as the team engaged in several problem-solving opportunities during the execution of the improvement initiative. Leadership-as-practice was supported by: (a) a culture of trust engendered by the rural school context; (b) the REORDER framework that guided the implementation of the initiative, and; (c) the resources that structured and supported information and or processes as the team worked together. A process of double loop learning also enabled the team to improve the ways in which members worked as they implemented the project or made changes to it.

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Findings from this study pinpoint the significant role that the close knitted and familial context of the rural school played in supporting the shared form of leadership evidenced during the implementation of the personalized and blended learning philosophy. Additionally, the leadership-as-practice perspective elucidates and captures the important contribution that is made by teachers to the leadership process of rural schools during the implementation of improvement initiatives. The findings of the study also support the need for leadership development that is contextually responsive and includes not only the principal, but all parties involved in the leadership practice in rural schools.

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“Give thanks to the Lord for he is good; his love endureth forever”

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I am guided by the motto of my High School in Jamaica ‘Age Qoud Agis’ which means whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability. I have completed this journey. As I look back

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on this journey, there are countless others who have played a role in the completion of this dissertation who were not named in this acknowledgement. With a heart full of gratitude, I say a big thank you to you all.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated:

To my Son, Ajani

my Husband, Fitzroy

my Parents, Jasmine & Levi and

my Siblings – Tamika, Donovan, Akieno, Stacy & La-Shawn

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CHAPTER ONE

Background

Multiple definitions of the phenomenon of leadership have been advanced by researchers, yet the concept continues to be hazy (Crevani, 2011). As early as 1959, Bennis speaks to the elusiveness of the concept of leadership, pointing out:

always, it seems the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So, we invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it...and still the concept is not sufficiently defined. (p. 259)

The definitions of the concept in the educational literature tend to reflect an exertion of influence towards a social purpose. For example, Northouse (2010) advances that “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Similarly, Day and Antonakis (2012), advance that “leadership must involve a social interaction among two or more individuals in pursuit of a mutual goal” (p. 109). Leithwood (2003) advances a more all-encompassing definition, suggesting:

leadership is a function more than a role. Although leadership is often invested in – or expected of – persons in positions of formal authority, leadership encompasses a set of functions that may be performed by many different persons in different roles throughout a school. (p. 2)

Leadership theories in education generally have undergone significant shifts over time. Knights and Willmott (1992) pointed out that the conceptualization of leadership as traits and styles has proven problematic because of the “difficulties with their identification and doubts about their explanatory power” (p. 791). This has resulted in the development of alternative theories, which

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have conceptualized leadership as “a contingent outcome of numerous contextual factors such as the type of subordinates, the features of the work group, the culture of organization” (p. 791).

Despite the varying definitions and theories advanced, researchers argue that leadership plays a vital role in unleashing the potential capacities that exist in schools, particularly in relation to facilitating quality teaching and learning (Dinham 2005; Leithwood, 2007).

Today’s school leaders are faced with an ever-increasing demand from stakeholders for improved performance in the operations of schools. Robertson and Weber (2002) state that, “educational leaders today are compelled to practice in complex politicized diverse conditions to a greater degree than ever in the history of education” (p. 520). Given the dynamic conditions and demands that are placed on schools to be effective, “the call for leaders who are creative and innovative has been more compelling than ever before” (Ingleton, 2013, p. 219).

Added to this increased public scrutiny is the fact that the environment within which educational leaders operate is dynamic and continues to change with time. This point is particularly evident in the rural school landscape that has been significantly impacted by the economic and demographic shifts of globalization and the attendant urbanization of populations (Howley, 1997). Rural schools in Canada, for example, face several challenges that have been brought on by social and economic conditions that have impacted these communities. The typical policy response to these conditions more often than not is the closure of rural schools (Wallin, 2007). Under such strenuous conditions, rural schools are forced to be “innovative out of necessity” to meet the demands of educational stakeholders (Wallin, 2007, p. 10).

For most schools, innovation is manifested in the design and implementation of school improvement projects. Leadership plays a key role in the successful implementation of such projects. Harris (2004) made the point that “contemporary educational reform places a great

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premium upon the relationship between leadership and school improvement” (p. 11). In other words, how leadership is enacted in the implementation of school improvement initiatives can break or make these initiatives. Given increased expectations amidst reduced public education spending, today’s school leaders have begun to work in a more networked fashion with other institutions, sectors, and stakeholder groups in order to share resources and build their capacities (Wallin, Anderson, & Penner, 2009). Leadership moves beyond the individual and is based more on coordinated actions amidst groups of people with varied intentions and interests in the successful implementation of the project.

Alternately, traditional approaches to leadership limit the study of school leadership, by focussing on the individuals who have been charged with formal responsibility to lead an organization, and how they respond to the context within which they lead. It becomes increasingly difficult, however, to define leadership as a property that is invested solely within the hands of a single individual who holds a formal title. In reality, the phenomena of leadership involves more than the actions of a single individual tasked to lead the organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) argued that “images of solitary heroic leaders mislead by suggesting that leaders go it alone and by focussing the spotlight too much on the leaders” (p. 344). No principal leads within a vacuum. Other organizational members, systems and structures impact the formal leader’s ability to enact his/her influence, and therefore, it is in the interaction of all of these factors that the leadership process occurs. This study attempted to understand the phenomenon of leadership in the dynamic context of a rural school that was implementing a school improvement initiative.

Problem and Purpose

Up to 2017, of the seven hundred and forty seven (747) schools located in the province of Saskatchewan, three hundred and forty eight (348) were in rural communities (Saskatchewan

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Education Ministry, 2017). The sheer number of rural schools makes these institutions worthy of study. Additionally, the rural school context provides several distinctive features that necessitate attention to this sector as an area of study. Schools located in rural communities generally have smaller or non-existent administrative staff, multi-grade classrooms, strong ties with the host communities and operational isolation attributed to long distances from other schools. These schools play a key role in catering to the needs of students situated in these communities. Despite its importance, however, the rural educational context is an understudied area (Wallin, 2009).

Rural schools operate under very tenuous conditions brought on by external system pressures (Newton & Wallin, 2013). Consequently, these rural schools develop coping mechanisms that include a culture of continuous improvement. This state of always seeking to improve their operations facilitates flexible approaches for meeting student needs through “innovative and creative solutions” (Clarke, Surgenor, Imrich & Wells, 2003, p. 13). Starr and White (2008) argue that “challenges in leading small rural schools have led to creative initiatives proving that sometimes educational obstacles may be opportunities in disguise” (p. 7). In other words, given the contextual challenges faced in the rural school context, school improvement plays a crucial role in the daily function of rural schools, as these schools are forced to be innovative in their functioning out of a need to maintain their operations.

Importantly, the literature points to the significance of leadership to successful school improvement (Harris 2003). However, the predominant focus of studies that examine leadership in small rural schools tends to pay attention to the leadership styles, and characteristics of principals in these schools (Coleman, 2013; Ford, 2014; Graham & Miller, 2015; Pina, 2013) or the contextual challenges faced by small rural school principals (Fernandez, 2002; Graham & Miller, 2015; Torres & Scheurich, 2007; Wallin & Newton, 2014). Essentially these studies

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adopt a leader-centric approach in their study of leadership. These accounts of leadership in the rural school setting do not provide a fulsome picture of the socially constituted phenomenon of leadership. Such a leader-centric approach pays attention to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of leadership rather than the ‘how’ of leadership (Chia, 2004; Spillane, 2015).

Alternatively, a practice based inquiry provides an innovative approach to the study of leadership. Crevani et al. (2010) point out that it is useful “to define leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction and study that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think” (p. 78). Therefore, focussing on the “how” of leadership directs our attention to the mundane and routine activities that are enacted by many people in rural schools that facilitate the meeting of organizational objectives and that in their accumulation over time facilitate the leadership influence for school improvement.

To illustrate the intent of the above paragraphs, the following case example offers an illustration of how school actors come together to respond to a school dilemma:

It was coming to the end of the school year and the school staff was getting ready to participate in the end of year review session. Mary Clarke has been a Grade four teacher at Middle Lake elementary school for the past three years. Concerned about the persistently low reading scores of her students she raised the issue at the last staff meeting. Acknowledging Mary’s raised hand, the meeting chairman Maxine Reed, a senior staff member, asked Mary to share her point.

Mary indicated that she thought a comprehensive reading program implemented from Kindergarten could help in raising the reading level of students. She pointed out that if the

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school was to make a significant impact in the lives of the students, this problem had to be addressed. Jane Brown, a teacher who had been at Middle Lake for more than 10 years, raised the point that a programme of that nature was done 10 years ago for the grade four students and had in fact resulted in an increase in their reading levels, however the programme was never sustained. Kelly Pryce questioned the wisdom in starting from kindergarten, pointing out that a more strategic move would be to start the programme from grade 1 through to grade 3.

An animated Gayle interrupted Kelly, asking Mary how such a programme would be implemented given the time constraints that teachers currently had, adding that this seemed like more work. Mary responded, indicating that a team could be formed to work with Dave, the English Catalyst teacher to assist in implementing the project. She pointed out that parents could be asked to play an integral role, so that the project would not add to the work load of the teachers. At this point Dave joined the conversation, indicating that he had heard of such programs being implemented in the district. He could access some information about the programme and share his findings at the next staff meeting. Maxine, sensing that there was consensus in the room about the value of Mary's suggestion, asked persons in the room to share their thoughts on Mary's suggestion.

Ben Fuller, the newly hired principal suggested that the plan could be implemented as one of the school improvement initiatives for the coming school year. On a unanimous decision by the team it was decided that an initiative would be started that sought to improve the reading learning outcomes of students from grades one to three.

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Fast forward one year later...The school recorded a marked improvement in the reading score of the classes that participated in this project.

How is leadership accounted for in this illustrative case? On one hand, leadership could be seen in terms of the principal's ability to lead the school to an improved reading outcome after a year in office. This understanding, however, does not account for the contribution of the other actors who were also involved in the conceptualization and implementation of the initiative. Interestingly, Starr and White (2008) advance that the contextual peculiarities of the rural small school necessitate the incorporation of multiple actors engaged in the leadership process, to facilitate the implementation of improvement initiatives. The teachers in this case were not waiting to be told what to do to respond to the situation; instead they collaboratively conceptualized a solution using past experiences as a guide. Paying attention to the practice, what is done during the interaction of these actors in this case provides an understanding of leadership that is not located in the actions and behaviour of the school principal alone. Leadership is found in the interaction of school actors as they engage with each other and the environment to meet organizational priorities.

In summary, while a review of the literature demonstrates that leadership is a well-studied area in educational settings, there is evidence that suggests that the phenomenon still needs further investigation (Leithwood, Janitz & Steinback, 1999; Parks, 2005). Consequently, this inquiry attempted to respond to the need for an alternative means of understanding leadership. The leadership process involves more than the positional leader engaging in particular actions, or displaying certain styles or behaviours, and involves multiple actors who interact with each other in advancing the direction of a project. (Raelin, 2016c; Simpson 2016).

Significance of Research

The importance of leadership in the implementation of school improvement projects, and the significance of these initiatives to the continued operation of rural schools was the impetus for this research. Another driver was my interest in alternative accounts of leadership that can provide a more nuanced understanding of rural school leadership. Consequently, this study utilized a practice lens (practice theory) to explore how leadership was enacted during the implementation of a rural school improvement project. A practice lens advances that an understanding of social phenomenon is found in the routine day to day activities (practices) in which social actors are engaged as they interact with each other and their environment (Nicolini, 2013). A practice approach to the study of leadership examines the activities that are embedded in the interaction of people and the socio material context in which they operate as they work towards an agreed upon end (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010). Ultimately this study aimed to describe and analyse the leadership process that were evidenced during the implementation of a rural school improvement project in a K -12 school in Saskatchewan.

The significance of this research lies in the methodological and practical significance of a practice based approach to the study of leadership in educational administration, particularly in rural schools. Of note is the potential of this study to enrich the understanding of researchers, policy makers, and school administrators of the nature of rural school leadership in the context of the implementation of an improvement initiative. This application of the practice lens in the study of leadership provides valuable insight about “where, how and why leadership work is being organized and accomplished, [rather] than about who is offering visions for others to do the work” (Raelin, 2011, p.3).

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Gaining insight into leadership as it unfolds can provide useful information as to how leadership practices can be strategically implemented to support change and innovation in rural schools. This area of study has far reaching implications for understanding what is actually done in the leadership of rural schools and the leadership processes that influence the effectiveness of those schools. Additionally, the focus on the practice of leadership in education is also significant, in the context of the turn to practice in social research (Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2012). This study aimed to add to the literature on “leadership as practice” that is a relatively new approach to exploring the phenomenon of leadership. By extension, this research may also provide useful content for leadership development initiatives for rural schools, as well as offer insight into effective practices for policy and/or program implementation.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the research process:

1. How is leadership-as-practice manifested during the implementation of a school improvement project in one rural Saskatchewan school?
2. What factors in the socio-material environment appear to influence how leadership-as-practice is enacted within the school improvement initiative in one rural Saskatchewan school?
3. How do the activities of leadership-as-practice appear to enable the successful implementation of the rural school improvement initiative?

Methodology

This study utilized an interpretive lens in which I, as the researcher, explored the “subjective meanings negotiated” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25) by school actors in one rural school through their interactions and actions as they engaged in leadership work during the

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implementation of the improvement project. My intent was to observe school actors in their natural setting, “to make sense of or interpret” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3) the socially constituted phenomenon of leadership. Ultimately this study aimed to get close to the lived experience or the everyday activity of rural school actors as they engaged in the implementation of the school improvement project.

An instrumental case study design as described by Stake (1995) was used to explore this phenomenon. Specifically, this case study took place over a three-month period and utilized non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, along with document analysis to get an understanding of how the practice of leadership was enacted in the selected rural school. The school was purposefully selected based on recommendations made by the Director of a rural school division. Two primary criteria included the need for the rural school to be geographically accessible to the researcher for logistical purposes of travel and time, and that the school was about to embark on a school improvement initiative. The purposeful selection of the school facilitated an in-depth understanding of the practice of leadership at work during the implementation of an improvement initiative in a rural school. In other words, the site selected “offers a manifestation of the phenomenon of interest” (Paton 2015, p. 46). I attended the planning and implementation meetings of the improvement team to observe their interaction as they worked on this project. I spoke with the participants of the team to elicit their views on the progression of the initiative, to acquire historical information related to the implementation of the project, and to study the roles and interactions between group members. During this process, I collected, and reviewed documents related to the project such as project plan, meeting minutes, or communications that provided evidence of how leadership actions were manifesting. The data sources included field notes produced from meeting observations, transcripts from semi-

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structured interviews, transcripts from meetings observed, relevant documents, and the notes generated from the document analysis.

In summary, with the aim of examining how leadership is enacted in a rural school setting, my research gained access to the lived experience of the improvement team members as they worked on implementing the project. This allowed me to see how the practice of leadership was enacted in this setting, how the factors in the socio-material context influenced the practice of leadership, and how the practice of leadership enabled the implementation of a school improvement initiative.

Delimitations

This inquiry was delimited by factors that acted as boundaries placed on the study, as well as situations that were beyond my control as I conducted this research:

- The activities of leadership permeate the life of a school; however, for this inquiry, the site of data collection was delimited to the activities that were bounded within the implementation of an improvement initiative. The focus on this specific instance of leadership facilitated a bounded instance of the practice of leadership.
- The team members working on the implementation of the school improvement initiative at the selected school provided the data used to study the practice of leadership. These team members included the school's principal, teachers, the school's superintendent and the Division's learning philosophy supervisor. All these persons had a role in the implementation of the school improvement project.
- Data collection for this inquiry was delimited to a three-month period (one school term) of the implementation of the improvement initiative.

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- This study was delimited to a school located in a rural area as used by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education that was at least 100 km away from the urban centre of Saskatoon which was actively involved in the implementation of a school improvement initiative.

Limitations

- This study was conducted over a three-month (one school semester) time period that provided only a snapshot of the practice of leadership during that particular time. As such, I cannot claim to have captured all of the leadership actions that may or may not have been part of the implementation of the initiative in its entirety.
- I utilized a purposive sample rather than a random sample that included only rural schools located in rural school divisions in Saskatchewan. I chose this setting because of its unique characteristics as a rural location, which allowed me to gather detailed information about how leadership was enacted in a rural school during the implementation of an improvement initiative. As a consequence, the collected data cannot be used to generalize across rural schools, or to provide a comparison of leadership practices between other type of schools or other provinces.
- There are several inherent limitations in the methods that were employed for this study. As it relates to semi-structured interviews, questions were open to interpretation by the respondents; in addition, my observations of the meetings, review of documents were subject to observer bias;
- Respondent honesty in answering interview questions was critical to the study's validity. It is presumed that participants responded honestly to questions, but it was also expected that these individuals had relationships with each other and were invested in the success of the school improvement initiative. As a consequence, some responses may have been

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masked in order to protect relationships or the future of the initiative. Although I cannot verify the honesty of respondents, I ensured that ethical protocols of anonymity and confidentiality were respected, and I implemented strategies that built trust between participants, and between participants and myself as researcher;

- I employed a case study design that was descriptive in nature and focused on leadership as it happened during the implementation of a rural school improvement initiative. The study also utilized the methods of non-participant observation, interviews, and document analysis to capture the practice of leadership in this instance. Given the study's design, time constraints, and methods employed, the transferability and generalizability of the findings of this study are limited, making it difficult to generalize from the findings of this inquiry. However, despite this limitation this study acquired rich data that detailed an instance of how leadership was enacted in a rural school during the implementation of an improvement initiative in this school. The findings of my study may provide policy makers, rural school principals and teachers, with insights into the enactment of rural school leadership and the implementation of school improvement.
- It is important to note that my presence could have shaped the outcome of the project meeting; this influence could be the source of a potential bias in this study. On the other hand, an outsider view was also provided as I interpreted what was happening in the practice as a non-member of the team.

Assumptions

This research was premised on the following assumptions:

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- Leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon that is observable through discernable practices enacted in the activities between social actors and the socio-material context (in this case, in a rural school).
- Activities that take place and are embodied in the relations between socio-material contexts and the actors within those contexts form the practices of leadership.
- For this study, the actions, and interactions of the members of the school improvement team and their relations to socio-material assemblages form the practice of leadership at the time of this investigation.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study I employed the following operational definitions:

- *Leadership*: “producing direction for organizing processes, re-orientation of the flow of practice, and emergent co-construction through collaborative agency” (Crevani & Endrisatt, 2016, p. 23)
- *Practice*: “a meaningful assemblage of human actors (including their intra-subjective and inter-subjective inner worlds), actions, linguistic objects (such as utterances and documents) and material objects” evidenced in the daily completion of their work (Goldkuhl, 2001, p. 10).
- *Rural Area*: For the purposes of this dissertation, I utilized the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education’s definition of rural as it has been accepted for the purposes of funding or other operations. This definition included all centres except three school divisions that are considered northern (Northern Lights, Ile la Crosse, and Creighton), and 19 centres that have been designated as urban centres with populations of more than 5000 residents.

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The 19 urban centres that are excluded from the study include Battleford, Estevan, Humboldt, Kindersley, Lloydminster, Martensville, Meadowlake, Melfort, Moose Jaw, Nipawin, North Battleford, Prince Albert, Regina, Saskatoon, Swift Current, Warman, Weyburn and Yorkton.

- *School Improvement*: “an approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change” (Hopkins 2001, p.13)
- *School improvement team*: the group of persons charged with planning and implementing a school improvement initiative. This included the school’s principals and teachers, the school’s superintendent and Division’s learning philosophy supervisor. The team’s composition was dependent on the skills and resources required for the implementation of the improvement initiative.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework graphically explains the main issues to be examined, the key factors, constructs or variables under study, and the presumed relationship among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). My conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.1 and encapsulates the three strands and corresponding concepts that were explored in the review of literature for this study. It points out that the study of leadership has evolved from leader centric, contextual and shared perspectives. The turn in practice in the social sciences has facilitated an additional perspective which identifies the socially constructed phenomenon of leadership as practices that are enacted by social actors (human and non-human) as they work towards meeting organizational objectives. These practices are shaped by the rural school context that facilitate or hinder the implementation of rural school improvement initiatives.

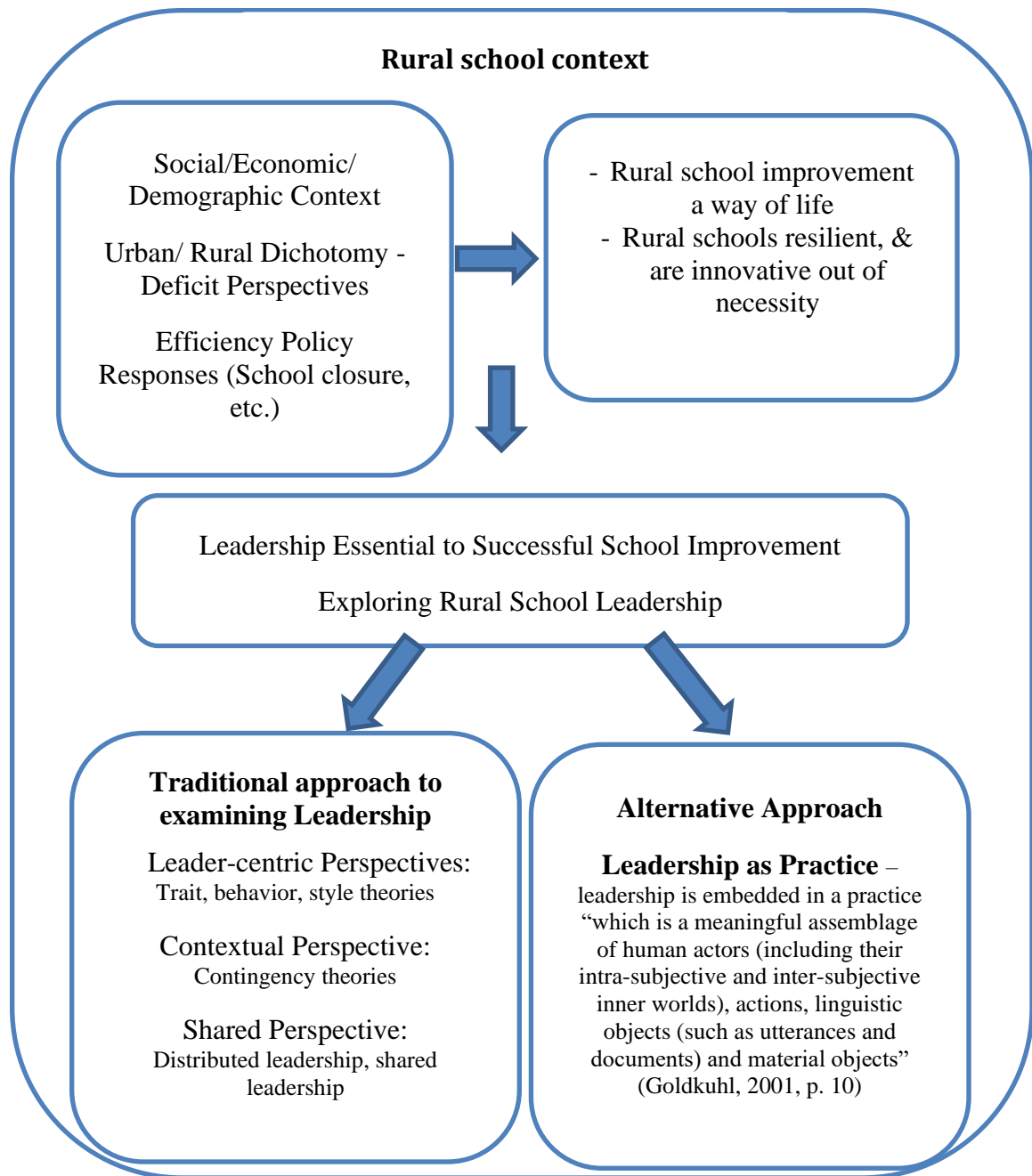


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework, Exploring Rural School Leadership

Positionality: The Researcher’s Frame of Reference

In keeping with the characteristics of qualitative research, it was important for me as the researcher to position myself in this study. According to Creswell (2013), this positioning is offered to acknowledge how a researcher’s “interpretation flows from their own personal,

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cultural, and historical experiences” (p. 25). To position myself in this study I share information about my educational and cultural background. I also articulate the genesis of my interest in this area of research.

I am a Jamaican international student enrolled in the doctoral program with a specialization in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan. My interest in school improvement and school leadership stemmed from my work with secondary schools in Jamaica through the Jamaica Productivity Centre's Secondary School Productivity Improvement Project. Through this project several secondary schools from rural and urban Jamaica were invited to form improvement teams consisting of teachers and students to undertake low cost or no cost improvement projects within their school. These teams were trained by the Centre in the Japanese improvement methodology of Kaizen as well as Waste Elimination through the 5s (Sort Set in Order, Shine, Standardize and Sustain) methodology, and then asked to go back to their respective schools to find a project that they could implement using what they had learned. The schools undertook several improvement projects focusing on waste elimination and process improvements. From this experience I found that the schools that did well in the project had engaged leadership support that was broader than that of the formal leader (principal) of the school. I wanted to further understand the leadership dynamics that operate within a school and how the process of leadership supported the successful implementation of improvement initiatives.

During my Masters degree training in the area of Human Resource Development, much attention was paid to the individual as leader. A variety of different leadership frameworks or models were studied, but all based on leader-centric approaches in which leaders engaged as they directed an organization. In my working experience as a senior level member of staff, my

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understandings and experience of leadership focused on leadership as an activity that was performed by the head of the organization or head of a team or department. This understanding of leadership framed the way that I looked at the work of the principal of a school. Indeed, under the banner of “continuous improvement” I organized several training sessions for school principals in my home country that focused on equipping them to improve their style of leadership, and to improve behaviors that would encourage their staff members to support their leadership of the organization. However, on starting my doctoral programme at the University of Saskatchewan I was introduced to the concept of “the practice of leadership” as an emerging framework for understanding the leadership process. I struggled with understanding this concept as my own pre-conceived notions of leadership based on my previous education and work experience located the activity of leadership in the individual assigned the role of leader.

The more I delved into the area the clearer my understanding of the “practice of leadership” became as I could see glimpses of its applicability even within my former workplace. When I reflected on how we (my former boss, other heads of department and I) made decisions as a team on the direction of projects, I realized that leadership emanated from the push and pull, ebb and flow, interaction between us as a team, and not from the mind, traits or behavior of our “boss”. This approach unsettled my understanding of leadership and led me down an exploratory road where I sought to examine the concept of leadership as a practice in which school actors engage as they work towards meeting the objectives of a school improvement initiative.

My decision to locate my study in the rural school context stemmed from my involvement as a doctoral research assistant on a project that examined the practices of rural school principals in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. This project piqued my interest in the contextual significance of the rural school landscape. Working on this project I realized that my

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understanding of schooling was steeped in a one size fits all frame that did not pay attention to, or appreciate, the contextual differences of schooling in an urban setting comparable to that of a rural setting. During this period, I also had an opportunity to attend a graduate level course on rural education. As a consequence of these experiences, I realized that my understanding of the rural education landscape was seen through the eyes of an urban citizen who attended urban schools. My interaction with rural schools in Jamaica came through my work with the school improvement projects during which I emphasized a leader-centric perspective and did not give credence to the actions of the staff members whose lives were invested in those projects.

The observed differences in urban and rural school settings in Jamaica could be seen in the landscape (hilly terrain, lots of trees and vegetation) surrounding the schools, and the differences in some of the subjects offered. For instance, in rural schools I was more likely to see agriculture being offered as a subject option compared to the urban schools. In addition, as an outsider to the Saskatchewan education system, my perception of what it means to be rural has also been challenged. I am from an island populated with approximately 2.8 million persons with a land mass of approximately 10,991 km² (World Bank, 2016). For me rural represents the place one goes when one wants to get away from the hustle and bustle of work in the urban part of the island. Rural was not a place where I was invested in the area, the ecology, and the people in a shared daily existence.

All of these experiences and learnings came together to shape my research interest in school leadership, school improvement initiatives and the rural school landscape. It is important that I share my socio-cultural influences as these influenced my understanding of and collection of the data. My “insider-outsider” perspective provided opportunities for me to engage directly in

these areas of interest, but also necessitated that I incorporate self-reflexivity throughout the research process.

Organization of the Thesis

The preceding chapter provided a background to the inquiry, the identification of the problem, purpose and significance of the study, as well as the limitations made in this inquiry. Also included in Chapter One is the significance of the research, the research questions and the researcher's positionality. Chapter Two provides an overview of the study of leadership. Particular attention will be paid to leader-centric accounts of leadership before focusing on practice theory and its application to the study of leadership. The chapter culminates with a description of the rural school context, paying particular attention to the constraints and opportunities impacting the operation of these schools, and the role of leadership within school improvement initiatives. Chapter Three provides an outline of the methodological assumptions that guided this inquiry. The research methods, epistemological and theoretical perspectives underpinning this study are explored in this chapter. Additionally, this chapter outlines the data collection and analysis procedures, a description of the coding and interpretation processes that were used in analyzing the data, ethical considerations and issues related to trustworthiness in qualitative research. Chapter Four focuses on the results of the data analysis. Finally, Chapter Five offers the implications of the study for research, theory and practice as well as the final conclusions of the research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

At the core of this research was an intent to understand how leadership-as-practice is enacted in the rural school setting during the implementation of a school improvement initiative. The study further sought to unearth how this knowledge can be used to enable the successful implementation of improvement projects in rural schools. The economic decline in many rural Canadian communities has continued to place pressure on rural schools, forcing school actors to engage in innovative strategies aimed at maintaining the operation of their schools (Hall & Olfert, 2015; Herzog & Pitman, 1999; Newton & Wallin, 2013). School improvement becomes a way of life for rural schools. An understanding of the role of school leadership in the implementation of improvement projects in the rural school context is important, given the significant role school leadership plays in the successful operations of schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

The literature review is divided into four parts. Part one provides a general overview of leadership studies, after which attention is paid to leader-centric studies of leadership. Part Two moves to describe the practice lens upon which this study was premised. Part three of the review examines the literature on the study of leadership in small and rural school settings and its importance to rural school improvement. Part four culminates in a weaving together of literature strands of the review to provide a conceptual understanding of how leadership-as-practice may be constituted in rural schools that are implementing a school improvement initiative.

Overview of Leadership Studies

The study of leadership continues to evolve as researchers unearth innovative ways of examining and understanding the phenomenon. There is a plethora of approaches advanced for the understanding of leadership generally and in the education sector. Despite this diversity in its study or understanding, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) advanced that the phenomenon is “difficult to pin down” with others emphasizing that there is still more to be learned about the concept of leadership, its effects, and the varying forms it can take (Leithwood, Janitz & Steinback, 1999). Gardener (1990) characterized leadership as “the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers” (p. 17). Heifetz (1994) suggested that “leadership is mobilizing people to tackle tough problems” (p. 15). As the definitions of leadership vary, so too do the theories that seek to explain the phenomenon.

Among the approaches to the study of leadership are theories that focus on the traits, behaviors, or competencies that an individual leader possesses as well as others that focus on the relationship between the leaders and followers. Carroll, Levy and Richmond (2008) explained that a significant amount of time has been spent in leadership studies paying attention to the qualities that leaders are believed to possess, the behaviors they should be demonstrating, and the intelligences they need to develop. They also point out that focus is also placed on the leader’s orientation to the nature of the work as well as on typologies that pay attention to a particular leadership style, brand or effect, and the relationship between themselves and those they lead. The following sections outline the historical development of leadership theories that have impacted understandings of school leadership.

Industrial Theories of Leadership

Early theories of leadership influenced by the Great Man theories of the industrial period focused on the traits, skills and behaviors of leaders. These leader-centric approaches to the study of leadership had as their focus the need to find out what makes certain individuals great leaders. The trait theory of leadership sought to identify specific personality traits that distinguish a person as a leader. Premised on the assumption that traits can predict the likelihood of an individual attaining a leadership position and being effective in the role, attention is paid to traits such as abilities, physical and personality characteristics and how they differ between leaders and non-leaders (Nelson & Squires, 2017). Stogdill (1948) reviewed 124 trait studies undertaken between 1904 and 1947, and sought to compile a comprehensive list of universal traits related to successful leadership. At the end of this review Stogdill was unable to come up with a universal list of traits for leaders. He also found that leadership was more than having a combination of traits. Rather, it “is a relation that exists between persons in a social situation, and that persons who are leaders in one situation may not necessarily be leaders in other situations” (p. 65). This view was further reinforced when Stogdill (1974) conducted a second review of an additional 163 trait studies covering the period 1948 to 1970.

In contrast to the trait approach to leadership is the style theory of leadership. This approach pays attention to the behaviors of leaders, focusing exclusively on what is done by leaders and how they behave. The approach centers on two types of leadership behaviors, namely task and relationship behaviors, and how these behaviors are used to influence followers to meet organizational goals (Northouse 2013, p. 75). This approach pays attention to the typical routinized behavior of the leader (Crevani & Endirastt, 2016). Like the trait theory of leadership,

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the leadership style approach paid particular attention to the individuals in the leadership role, and how their style of leadership lead to effective outcomes.

Post Industrial Theories of Leadership

As research on leadership developed, other theories emerged as scholars became interested in the “effectiveness of leadership by examining how leadership seeks to transform or change organizations” (Chance, 2009, p. 93). Leadership studies moved to focus on the relationship between leaders and followers. Burns (1978), in his seminal work, advanced a theory of leadership that focused on two types of leader-follower relationships, namely transactional and transformational leadership. The transactional leader influences followers through the “exchange of valued things” (Burns, 1978, p. 20). On the other hand, a transformational leader encourages “an engagement between leaders and followers bound by a common purpose where leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (Burns, 1978, p. 20). The transformational approach to leadership places significant importance on the role of the follower in the leadership process. Though attention is paid to the followers in the leadership process, the leader is still viewed as a heroic individual who creates a vision for, or motivates, followers (Northouse 2013). By focusing on the formal leader, Northouse (2013) opined that “researchers have failed to give attention to shared leadership” (p. 23).

Shared Leadership Theories of Leadership

The concept of shared leadership can be found in several leadership theories. This concept provides an understanding of leadership beyond that of a role driven phenomenon. The idea that leadership is shared in organization has its genesis in the work of Follet (1927) who

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advanced a belief that leadership in organizations may not only be found in the person holding positional power. Using this lens, leadership is understood as being distributed across groups of persons within an organization. Follet (1927) proffered that “the leader has not always the largest share in decision making, and yet he may not be any less of the leader” (p. 247). This is exemplified in a school principal who depends on the knowledge of teachers as subject matter experts when making organizational decisions.

One form of shared leadership is the distributed leadership model advanced by Spillane (2005). The distributed form of leadership pays attention to the interactions between persons within the organization in an effort to understand leadership in a given context. Spillane (2005) advanced that leadership is found in the interactions of school actors in each context as they work together. This approach to the study of leadership moves the unit of analysis from an individual leader to that of the practice of leadership (Spillane, Alverson, & Diamond, 2001). This point is quite significant given the traditional leader-centric models advanced in the literature. The distributed leadership model locates leadership in the activity of an organization rather than in a role or position. The distributed lens sees “leadership practice constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations” (Spillane et al, 2001, p. 27). In other words, leadership emerges when people work together, using varying tools such as language, material artifacts and tools.

Despite the claim that leadership is not a role driven phenomenon but is in fact a social phenomenon that is spread across several formal and informal leaders in an organization, there are several criticisms of the distributed leadership model in this vein. According to Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff (2010), the distributed leadership model looks at new ways of restructuring leadership, rather than providing information on “new basic perspectives in

leadership or new assumptions on how to do leadership research” (p.78). Raelin (2016c) also pointed out that the distributed leadership model that “speaks to leadership as a mutual and plural activity...maintains the standard leader follower roles intact while attempting to distribute power more fairly” (p. 9). Ultimately the distributed leadership approach moves the action of leadership from one individual to several individuals while still locating leadership in the agency of positional leaders in the organization.

Drawbacks of Leader-centric Studies

A significant amount of time has been spent in leadership studies focusing on the agency of positional leaders (Caroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008; Crevani & Endersatt, 2016; Newton & Riveros, 2015). Evers and Lakomski (2013) opined that the focus on the individual leader “can both bracket and discount the causal field in which organizational functioning occurs” (p. 164). This point is seen in studies that focus on the activities of the school principal or teacher leaders, paying attention to their behaviours and the traits that they possess that enable or inhibit the successful operation of the school. Spillane (2005), in rejecting leader-centric studies in education, suggested that leadership based on the individual is flawed as “school principals or any other leader for that matter, do not single-handedly lead schools to greatness, leadership involves an array of individuals with various tools and structures” (p. 143). Speaking from his years of studies in political leadership, Cronin (1984) posited that leadership is “highly situational and contextual...there is chemistry between leaders and followers which is usually context specific” (p. 23). Consequently, the actors in the leadership process and the context in which they operate are essential components in understanding the leadership phenomenon. In other words, the complexity of the leadership process that encompasses multiple actors, influenced by context, speaks to the challenge of limiting its study to the activity of the

individual leader. This results in attention being paid to what formal leaders do and say as well as their mental models of action at the expense of the contribution of other activities, environmental factors and people that may have influenced the leadership process. Therefore, this approach limits the role of the context or structure within which the leadership process or activity occurs, providing a lopsided view of the phenomenon.

Practice Theory and Its Application to Understanding Leadership

A response to this account of leadership could perhaps be found by paying attention to “practices” in the social world. There are a range of perspectives in the literature on practices; what they are and how they should be studied. Practices have been viewed as behaviours or activity; they have been understood from emancipatory, socio material, and pragmatist orientations. One view is a pragmatic account of the social world that pays attention to “inter-subjectivity as a key element of social life” (Mertens, 2010, p. 36). This philosophy speaks to the assumption that human beings are active participants in their social world and it is through their participation that they continuously construct and reconstruct social meanings that shape their thoughts and action (Simpson, 2009). Johnson, Langley, Melin and Whittington (2007) posited that pragmatism offers researchers three guidelines: it values concrete action and experience, places people at the centre of analysis and emphasises the importance of knowledge as practical and making a difference “rather than striving vainly for correspondence with an elusive reality” (p. 33). For the pragmatist researcher then “the essential emphasis is on actual behavior (lines of action), the beliefs that stand behind those behaviors (warranted assertions), and the consequences that are likely to follow from different behaviors (workability)” (Morgan, 2007, p. 67). In other words, a pragmatist philosophical pay attention to what people do, their potential for shaping their social world and how this knowledge can improve their existence. In shedding

light Dewey's pragmatist philosophy in relation to practices, Simpson (2009) outlined that the pragmatist view "offers a way of drawing together the habitual and creative aspects of practice, while at the same time transcending the problematic separation between individual and social level of analysis" (p.1330). In outlining this view, Simpson (2009) further described practices as "the conduct of transactional life, which involves the temporally-unfolding, symbolically mediated interweaving of experiences and action" (p. 1338). As a consequence, practices are understood to have a recursive nature, and they include the potential for actors to alter the outcome of activities based on their ongoing transactions within a practice. It is important to note that the outcomes of a practice cannot be calculated by logical prediction alone, as they are the "enactments of the future that emerge as actors anticipate the likely outcomes of their social actions...these anticipatory acts shape actors' choices regarding their ongoing conduct, and ultimately shape their world as well" (Simpson, 2009, p. 1338). In other words, the parties to a practice do not know the outcome of the practice beforehand, as the activities are shaped in the moment, through the interactions of the participants of the practice. The pragmatist view of practices advanced by Simpson (2009) draws attention to transactions as the location of meaning-making thereby "providing a non-dualistic way of framing practice that neither privileges agency nor structure" (p. 1339).

Another account of practices can be found in practice theory, "like pragmatism, practice theory stresses a non-representationalist and non-dualist account of human activity" (Buch & Elkjær, 2015, p. 3). Several leadership scholars have been drawing on practice theory to get a better understanding of the social phenomenon of leadership (Raelin, 2016b; Recwitz, 2002). The focus on the practice of leadership has its genesis in the "turn in practice" in social theory, which is concerned with what people do in their daily lives (Nicolini, 2012; Recwitz, 2002;

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Schatzki 2012; Whittington, 2006). According to Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), the practice lens is underscored by a move to conceptualize social life “as an ongoing production and thus emerges through people’s recurrent actions” (p. 1240). The “turn to practice” which can be witnessed in sociology and education among other subject areas, has its genesis in the move by social researchers to conceptualize and understand the social world in diverse ways. Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) pointed out that as a “theoretical paradigm, practice theory is still a relatively unsettled intellectual landscape” (p. 1241). This results in divergent views being advanced among scholars in the field of practice theory about how one approaches the study of practices (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2009; Nicolini 2012; Schatzki, 2001). Despite the overall differences in approaches, some underlying principles can be identified across the field of study. Feldman and Olikowski (2011) advanced three interrelated principles that can be identified across the variations of practice theory. These principles speak to the role of situated action, the rejection of dualisms as a means of theorizing, and mutually constitutive relations in the understanding of the social world. Each of these are described in the sections that follow.

Situated Action

The first common principle relates to the consequential role that situated action “plays in the production of social life” (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241). This core theme suggests that social structures such as the family, schools, authority, etcetera, are kept in existence through the routinized and recurrent daily activities that form a practice “and to a large extent they only exist as long as those activities are performed” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). One variation of this principle incorporates the role of materiality (non-human actors) in the production of social life (Ghearadi, 2009; Nicolini 2013). Ghearadi (2009) posited that this variation in practice studies has at its core a “model in which agency is distributed between humans and non-humans” (p.

115). In this vein, Nicolini (2012) characterized practices as “routine bodily activities made possible by the active contribution of an array of material resources” (p. 4). These material resources, such as natural objects and technological artefacts, can sustain practices and connect them over space and time.

Consequently, the daily actions of social actors in collaboration with material objects that are used in the completion of activities form the practices that enable and perpetuate social structures such as schools. For instance, if one examines the practice of teaching, attention has to be paid to the actions of the teacher and students, as well as the role that materials (objects) such as books, the chalkboard, the desks and the chairs, etcetera, play in both “producing and perpetuating” the practice of teaching in a given space and time as well as connecting it to other activities which form other practices.

Rejection of Dualisms as a Way of Theorizing

Practice theorists working from different perspectives sought to move “beyond current problematic dualisms and ways of thinking” (Schatzki 2001, p. 10), by advancing a focus on practices as the observable reality in the social world. This is the second principle advanced by Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) in their list of similarities of practice approaches. This principle relates to the “rejection of dualisms and recognition of the inherent relationship between elements that have often been treated as dichotomous” (p. 1242). One such dichotomy is the agency and structure divide. According to Chia and McKay (2007) the focus on practice facilitates a “radical reformulation of the intractable problem of agency and structure that enables us to bypass the ‘micro/macro’ distinction so intimately tied to the social sciences in general” (p. 217). The rejection of reduction to dualism is evidenced in the work of Anthony Giddens (1984),

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structuration theory, which posits a view of social systems as a duality being produced and reproduced by both agency, (free will) and structure (determinism). This account of the social world sees “social life as a series of social activities and practices performed by individuals and by means of which, at the same time, those individuals reproduce social institutions and structures” (Gherardi, 2011, p. 47). In other words, the social world is not understood in its entirety by focussing only on what individuals do (free will) or by paying attention to societal structures (determinism). Instead it is explained by focussing on how both elements come together to produce and reproduce the social world. In the case of this study, the examination the social phenomenon of leadership attends to what the social actors do (the agency of the social actors), the structures that enable them to do their work, and on the interactions of structure and agency that together impact the practices of leadership.

Mutually Constitutive Relations

The third principle advanced relates to the “relationality of mutual constitution” which speaks to the notion that “phenomena exists in relation to each other” and are made through a mutually constitutive process (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1242). Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory highlights this principle in explaining the mutually constitutive role of agency and structure in the formation of the social world. Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) posited that “social orders (structures, institutions, routines, etcetera) cannot be conceived without understanding the role of agency in producing them, and similarly agency cannot be understood simply as human action, but rather must be understood as always configured by structural conditions” (p. 1242).

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The practice turn in social theory provides an alternative means of examining social reality that challenges the traditional ways of studying the social world, thereby facilitating a movement of thought into a new ontological and epistemological sphere (Chia & MacKay, 2007). The practice turn is not an attempt to overthrow normal science but instead “opens up intellectual frontiers, invites new ways of seeing and suggests new questions to be answered” (Simpson 2009, p. 1329). In other words, the focus on practices as the observable reality in the social world facilitates an alternative lens through which to understand social phenomenon such as leadership.

Applying a Practice Lens to the Study of Leadership

Nicolini (2012) posited that the attraction to practice theory can be attributed to the theory’s capacity to uniquely describe elements of the social world by providing:

opportunity to reinterpret all the imaginable organizational phenomena suggesting, for example, that the object of inquiry should be managerial and entrepreneurial activities, not managers and entrepreneurs; strategy making and sale practices not strategists and sales persons; leadership practices not leaders. (p.7)

Following on Nicolini’s (2012) claim, applying the practice lens to the study of rural school leadership facilitates the examination of the leadership phenomenon as a social practice. Given this characterization, as a ‘social practice’, the study of leadership is concerned with the lived experiences of individuals as they interact with each other as well as their environment engaged in the leadership process. Crevani and Endrisatt (2016) explained that leadership-as-practicerelates to the production of “direction for organizing processes, re-orientation of the flow of practice, and emergent co-construction through collaborative agency” (p. 23). Consequently,

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the study of leadership in rural schools using the practice lens facilitates an exploration of how the process of leadership is socially constructed among rural school actors.

Drawing on Goldkuhl's (2011) definition of a practice, a leadership practice can be characterized as "a meaningful assemblage of human actors (including their intra-subjective and inter-subjective inner worlds), actions, linguistic objects (as utterances and documents) and material objects" (p. 10) evidenced in the daily completion of their work as they work toward an agreed-on end. In other words, the observable reality in studies that employ this understanding of leadership is the "emergent socio-material assemblages of activity that include the embodied engagements of actors" involved in the leadership phenomenon (Newton & Riveros, 2015, p. 331). By engaging with practices in the study of rural school leadership, attention is brought to the everyday activity undertaken in the leadership process, how these activities are generated, and how they operate over time among participants.

Unlike leader-centric studies of leadership that pay attention to what the individual leader does and why, the practice approach pays attention to the "practice of ordinary actors which includes actors who do not necessarily hold official positions or roles as leaders...and also includes non-human actors such as objects and materiality" (Crevani & Endirastt, 2015, p. 44). Moving beyond a focus on the individual who has been labelled leader, leadership-as-practicethen "seeks to understand the leadership activity wherever it happens" (Raelin, 2016b, p. 5) in an organization. This view is supported by Simpson (2016) who posits that it "decentres the individual leader, turning the analytical gaze instead towards more contextualized participatory engaged and relational understandings of leadership" (p. 159). According to Spillane (2005) "leadership practice centres not only on what people do but how and why they do it.

Understanding that leadership practice is imperative to generate usable knowledge about and for

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school leadership” (p. 148). Applying this approach to the study of rural school leadership is useful in providing an understanding of how leadership “emerges and unfolds” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 3) as school actors work together to meet organizational objectives.

Gunter and Ribbins (2003) advance that the study of leadership in education should be rooted in “the experience and understanding of everyday practice and how that activity can be challenged and developed” (p. 263). Attention is paid to the practice of leadership to see how the phenomenon unfolds as rural school actors influence and are influenced by the social and material environment within which the school operates. This approach facilitates an understanding of “how school actors creatively transform and configure the contexts that simultaneously structure their own actions” (Newton & Riveros, 2015, p. 337). This is an area of focus Carroll (2016) advanced that is rarely acknowledged in most leadership literature. Such studies would bring to the fore, among other things, how the demands of the environment influence the actions of the actors within the school environment, paying attention to the “everyday clutter and direct spatial context of leadership” (Carroll, 2016, p. 96). Ultimately attending to leadership practice in the rural school setting as the focus of inquiry enables asking questions such as: “what are people doing and saying? How do the patterns of doing and saying flow in time? Through which moves, strategies methods and discursive practical devices do actors accomplish their work” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 221). In other words, the embodied activity of individuals involved in the leadership practice in the rural school, as well as the socio-material context that may include meeting agendas, minutes, tables, and chairs, all contribute to the emergent practice as persons work towards meeting organizational outcomes.

As an example, Carroll (2016) studied the emergence of leadership practices in a small Information Technology (IT) company during a stand-up meeting. The team of approximately

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100 persons worked in an open office setting in which they worked individually and consulted with each other as the need arose on projects. Carroll, who was shadowing Dan, a member of the team, recounted the details of the stand-up meeting. She noted that the team members automatically stopped what they were doing and gathered around Dan once he produced a koosh ball from his desk and started tossing it from hand to hand, an action that was visible to all in the room. Once the staff members were gathered Dan provided an update on the status of the work, after which he tossed the ball to another team member who provided an update on what she/he was working. This step continued around the room with each person repeating the previous step. Carroll noted that during this time, Dan was attentively listening to each of the updates. She noted the excitement of one of the team members who was anxious to receive the ball. On receiving the ball this staff member provided an account of steps being taken to solve a glitch in the system that he had discovered. Other staff members became engaged in the report and a discussion of the problem started.

Carroll noted that Dan joined this conversation and provided a summary of the situation, stating, “So there are two ways being suggested to move on this thing, right?” The gentleman responded in the affirmative, adding other elements to the discussion after which he passed the koosh ball on to the next person. After everyone had an opportunity to give an update, Dan tossed the ball in his hand and asked everyone in the room, “We are all good to go on?” Without expecting an answer, seemingly satisfied with the outcome of the meeting, Dan left for his next meeting of the day. Carroll (2016) noted that some workers returned to their desks while others could be seen continuing the discussion about the problem raised by the gentleman.

In advancing this account of the interaction of the actors in this IT company, Carroll (2016) provided an example of “how” leadership is enacted in this space. Crevani and Endrissat

(2016) pointed out that “looking for leadership practice means looking not only at the actions performed by one person in a formal leadership position but more generally at how actors get on with the work of leadership” (p. 32). This characterization highlights the importance of leadership as situated activity that emanates from the actions and interactions of actors among themselves as well as with the materials and artefacts with which they work. This point is highlighted in the interactions that unfold in the stand-up meeting. The interactions of the actors point out the routinized nature of leadership practice, yet it is through the interaction of the actors that work is advanced in this meeting. The conversations and interactions of the actors also contributed to the practice of leadership as the participants of the practice “co-construct their sense of direction through their own form of social interaction” (Raelin 2016b, p. 11). It also highlights the role that artefacts can play in the practice of leadership, with the koosh ball acting as a tool to engage persons in the practice as they participated in the meeting.

As a second example, the work undertaken by Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, and Bristol (2014) is evidence of the influence of the turn to practice in education. In their empirical work, titled the Leading and Learning Project (LLP), Kemmis et al. (2014) paid particular attention to five elementary schools in Australia. Starting from the premise that social forms such as the school, curriculum or pedagogy are the products of social practices and vice versa, Kemmis et al. (2014) made the point that any change in these social forms requires finding ways of transforming the practices that inform and reproduce them. Their study also aimed to show how “practices are shaped not solely by the intentional action and practice knowledge of participants but also by circumstances and conditions, which are ‘external’ to them” (Kemmis et al 2010, p. 7). Influenced by practice theorist Theodore Schatzki, Kemmis et al (2010) aimed to see how practices relate to each other in ways that demonstrate independence.

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They paid particular attention to the interrelated practices of educational leadership, professional learning, teaching and learning. The work undertaken by this research team highlights the value of applying a practice lens to an understanding of educational organizations. Their study found that practices cannot be transformed without “first transforming existing arrangements in the intersubjective spaces that support practices” (Kemmis et al., 2014 p. 6). In other words, any transformation in education with respect to teaching, curriculum development, school effectiveness, leadership, etcetera, needs to be undertaken by finding new ways of understanding and doing things, interacting with the socio-material environment and individuals engaged in these educational practices.

In advancing the leadership-as-practice perspective, leadership scholar Joseph Raelin, articulates that his understanding of practice is influenced by the “the phenomenological tradition in which the intersubjective production and re-production of meaning arise through social interaction and from knowledge emanating from our social reality” (Raelin 2019, p. 3). He explained that in the leadership-as-practice perspective, leadership is conceptualized as “occurring in a practice rather than residing in the traits or behaviors of particular individuals” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 1). Drawing on the work of Brigid Carroll and Barbara Simpson; Jeffrey Goldstein, James Hazy, and Benjamin Lichtenstein; as well as James Hazy and Mary Uhl-Bien researchers in the fields of organizational discourse, innovation and complex adaptive systems, Raelin (2016a), advances several activities that can be found in leadership-as-practice. In contextualizing these activities Raelin explained that it is important to note that a practice “concerns how work gets done to achieve an outcome, so some of the activities are tacit and thus very hard to describe” (Raelin 2016a, p.126). Despite this disclaimer of the tacit nature of some these activities, he points out that the activities are “observable and learnable” (p. 126). The

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following activities have been advanced by Raelin (2016a) advances the following eight as familiar in the practice of leadership.

Designing. This activity speaks to the team discussing varying approaches and then deciding on the respective responsibilities that each member of the team would take on.

Scanning. Scanning relates to the identification of resources (such as information, or technology) that can support new or existing programs (Raelin 2016a). An example of scanning is evidenced in projects when members of the team working on a project do an analysis of what tools they have and may need to get as well as determine where to get these to advance the project.

Mobilizing. Another activity speaks to mobilizing and catalyzing the attention of other actors to a particular program of action or a project that could inform the activity being worked on by the group. For instance, this can be seen in the move by an actor involved in the activity bringing the group's attention to a similar or related project undertaken previously in the organization in order for the group to use this information as evidence from which to learn or build as they work on their own activity.

Weaving. The activity of weaving addresses the creation of webs of interaction across existing and new networks to document and mobilize mutual activities. This in turn builds trust and a sense of shared meaning (Raelin, 2016a). An example of this activity is demonstrated in Carroll's (2016) account of leadership practices during the standing meeting in the small IT firm. The updates provided by the team members facilitated the sharing of the status of their assigned tasks. Team members were able to benefit from the support of each other in problem solving where needed.

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Stabilizing. The third activity, stabilizing, attends to the provision of feedback to the program of action to bring together activity and examine effectiveness, thereby resulting in structural and behavioral changes and learning; for example, following on the previous illustration, stabilizing can be seen through the provision of feedback from the team in which a team member could improve turnaround time in the completion of a task.

Inviting. Inviting speaks to encouraging those who are non-participative to join in the leadership process by sharing their ideas. An example of this can be seen during meetings when team members who have been noticeably shy may be called upon by the meeting chair or another team member to share their views on the issue being discussed.

Unleashing. The activity of unleashing ensures that everyone who wishes to participate in the leadership process gets a chance to contribute without fear of repercussion. Referring to the standing meeting described by Carroll (2016), an example of this activity can be demonstrated in the use of the koosh ball. The ball facilitated the unleashing activity as it was passed around the room. The ball imbued its holder with the authority to contribute to the meeting without fear of repercussions.

Reflecting. Reflecting triggers thoughtfulness within the self and with others to consider the meaning of past, current and future experiences in order to learn how to address shared needs and interests (Raelin, 2016a). An example of this activity can be witnessed in meetings when team members are asked to consider the impact of a major event like a cut in the funding budget on the execution of their project. This call to reflect on the implications of the budget constraints requires the team to think about their past and current experiences to learn how to move forward on the project.

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These activities outlined by Raelin (2016a) provide a useful framework for identifying the activities of leadership in the data collection process for this inquiry. They provided a starting point for the observation of the activities of the practice of leadership in the rural school that was used in this study. The subsequent section provides an account of the literature base related to rural school contexts and leadership, arguing that a practice approach to leadership could reinvigorate the research conducted in this area of study that has been limited to a leader-centric approach.

The Rural School Context

This section of the review of literature outlines the challenges related to defining “rurality”. Attention will be paid to the stereotypical notions that have been associated with the rural context and have contributed to the deficit narrative that permeates conceptualizations of what it means to be rural (Corbett, 2014). The complexities of rural school leadership, as well as school improvement initiatives in the rural school setting will also be discussed.

Defining Rural

One of the fundamental challenges in rural research is the difficulty related to demarcating what constitutes rural (Coladarci, 2007; Corbet, 2014; Herzog & Pitman 1999; Roberts, 2014; Tieken, 2014; Wallin, 2003). Definitions outlining what it means to be "rural" include measures related to geographical indicators as well as the social and cultural characteristics of an area. Geographical indicators commonly used to locate rural include “population density”, “population size”, “distance from an urban area” or “distance to an essential service” (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 4). While the aforementioned geographical classifications are used by researchers, policy makers, and statisticians in their respective fields,

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there is variation in the determination of which geographical marker should be used to identify a rural space.

Beyond the geographical definitions for rural there are also definitions that pay attention to the social and cultural complexities of the rural space. Howley, Theobald, and Howley (2005), in providing a place-based definition of rural stated that “rural is not most significantly the boundary around it, but the meanings inherent in rural lives, wherever lived” (p. 1). Place based definitions of rural speak to the perception that residents of rural spaces have about what it means to be rural. Tieken (2014), in supporting this point, advances that rural “constitutes one’s identity; it shapes one’s perspective and understandings; and it gives meaning to one’s daily experiences. This identity, this shared, and place-dependent sense of rural belonging gives rural its significance” (p. 5). These perceptions that are not adequately captured in geographic understandings of rurality are essential in painting a picture of the contextual nuances of a rural space.

Rural Urban Dichotomy – Deficit thinking

Of note in the identification of rural areas is its situation in relation to its urban other. Put another way, in this representation “rural is measured by what is left over after urban areas have been demarcated” (Farmer, 1997, p. 621). Speaking to this rural-urban binary, Corbett (2014), points out that linguistically the term “rural” tends to be placed in juxtaposition to terms such as “modern”, “developed”, “diverse”, and “cosmopolitan”, adding that “if the urban is seen as coterminous with modernity, rural is typically positioned as modernity’s other” (p. 5). The rural space is also conceptualized as a “space that is outside the temporal boundaries of a world which is supposed to be moving out of the country and into the metropolis” (Corbett & White, 2014, p.

2). These reductive definitions have resulted in the invisibility of the rural context and have contributed to the deficit narrative of the rural space (Tieken, 2014). Atkin (2003), points out:

Largely rural communities have seen an urban agenda ...rolled out across the countryside, with issues of equity and access, rather than appropriateness, dominating the discourse. It is as if rural society is to be judged in terms of a deficit discourse (dominated by the desire to make them like us) rather than a diversity discourse (recognition and value of difference). (p. 513)

In the conduct of rural education research, Herzog and Pittman (1995) posit that the absence of an agreed upon definition of the term “rural” is a challenge for the future of rural education. On the other hand, Coladarci (2007) makes the point that attention should not be focused on finding a definitive definition for rural but that researchers should meticulously describe the context of their rural studies. This would facilitate the provision of a rich description of the context so that readers can make “informed judgements about the generalizability of the study” (p. 2). The definition adopted by a researcher is dependent on the aim of the research being undertaken. As it relates to the use of geographical representations, researchers should pay attention to the purpose of their research, whether the issue that is being investigated is a “local community or regional one” (Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 1).

This study explored how the practice of leadership was enacted in a rural context as a school implemented an improvement initiative. In keeping with Coladarci’s (2007) premise that rural research should provide a detailed description of the rural context, this inquiry provided a rich description of the context that enables readers to make informed decisions about the transferability of this study’s findings for rural education in other rural spaces.

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Regardless of the definition used for “rural” there is no disputing the importance of the rural context in education (Corbet, 2014; Tieken, 2014). Although not entirely generalizable, many rural communities are plagued with declining socio-economic conditions stemming from rural to urban migration (demographic decline), and an aging population. According to Hall and Olfert (2015), the closure of schools and government business closely tracks population decline in rural communities. The Saskatchewan rural landscape has been affected by school closures with the greatest decline occurring between 1991 to 1992 and 2009 to 2010 with 164 schools being closed (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010). The rural school is oftentimes the largest employer in rural communities and as such tends to be seen as a “symbol of community survival and community values” (Wallin, 2005, p. 136). According to Clarke and Wildy (2004), one of the features that highlights the importance of small schools is “the extended role they tend to play in the community, particularly in rural and remote areas” (p. 556). The reality is rural schools operate under very tenuous conditions given the general uncertainties brought on by the social, economic, political and demographic factors that impact rural communities. These factors include declining population brought on by migration of families, the resultant closures in businesses, high poverty and unemployment rates (Herzog & Pitman, 1999). Despite these trying circumstances, these schools represent an important and relevant constituent in the education sector given their role in the education of rural youth.

Corbett (2014) rejects the deficit discourse that positions rural schools as less than their urban counterpart. He advances that this thinking should be challenged, and steps taken to “develop more complex and rich spatial analysis of the Canadian educational phenomena” (p. 3). Corbett and White (2014) point out that despite the deficit narrative and understanding of the rural context these places “remain resilient” (p. 2). Most rural researchers write about the reality

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that many small schools in rural communities fight to resist their demise even as they act as the heartbeats of their communities (Newton & Wallin, 2013).

Rural School Leadership

Wallin (2007), in referencing the challenging conditions under which many rural schools have to operate, argued that these schools are “innovative out of necessity,” (p.10) and that they are constantly finding ways to reorganize or shape policy, program and resources to support teaching and learning. In referring to his study of a rural school in eastern Canada, Anderson (2008) made the point that rural schools in the division studied operated in a less restrictive context where they worked with relative freedom from formal leadership roles such as that of the vice principal, department heads or curriculum leaders. This freedom created room for teachers to take on leadership roles, particularly in the implementation of school improvement projects. In the Australian context, Starr and White (2008) made the point that “resultant challenges are generating new distinctive rural leadership responses and collaboratively derived outcomes” (p. 10). They added that collaborations have been on the up-take and have increased in importance with school actors working collectively “to cover teaching, learning leadership and management requirements...Collective activities have been prompted by the requirements of structural reforms and problems of limited resources and are aided by new technologies and a renewed sense of community” (p. 7).

The complex environment in which rural schools operate call for particular attention to effective leadership in these schools. In fact, Clarke & Wildy (2004) argued that the contextual complexity of small rural school’s leadership deserves attention. Referencing the varying needs and priorities of students, parents and community members in the rural school context, Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) argued that “leadership in rural schools is multifaceted, place-

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conscious, and relationship-dependent” (p. 7). They further pointed out that effective rural school leadership warrants the incorporation of “strategies that are responsive to the realities of each individual rural community” (p. 8). Research points to the importance of shared leadership as a key component of the rural school environment. In their study on the successful school principalship in small schools, Ewington, Mulford, Kendall, Edmunds, Kendall and Silins (2008) found that there are contextual demands that necessitate that the principal provides “both strong and shared leadership, using resources effectively while working collaboratively, being responsible for decisions made by or with others and being responsive to local needs within a framework of system priorities” (p. 558). Given the small size of schools and the corresponding staff complement, leadership in some rural schools tend to be spread across the entire staff to ensure that the operation of the school is successful. Expounding on the work done by Falk and Mulford (2001) in their analysis of leadership in rural schools, Star and White (2008) argued that “distributed, participatory forms of leadership and decision-making enable a shared vision, in contrast to traditional forms of leadership concentrated on the solitary individual with a singular vision in a stand-alone setting” (p. 9). It is important to note, however, that the shared view of leadership still gives primacy to a leader-centric understanding of how leadership is enacted in the rural space.

Rural school actors, by virtue of their contextual peculiarities such as a small staff complement, engage in a collaborative approach to leadership. Indeed, Wallin’s and Newton’s (2013) examination of the instructional leadership of the rural principal found that rural principals perceived that their role was to “support the development and achievement of the school’s vision rather than developing it themselves” (p. 22). One principal explained it this way:

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You can't just walk in, no matter who you are, or how much experience you have or how charismatic you are, you can't walk in and say, 'OK this is the way it is.' Because this is a whole system, this is a whole community that existed before you were even there. So, you need to give it its due respect and then you need to help nudge and guide it in the direction you want by using all of those people that are involved, figuring out what they're good at, what they want to see, and trying to make it happen as a group. (Wallin & Newton, 2013, p. 22)

Drawing from this instance, one is able to discern how rural school principals envision their role in the leadership process as they work towards school improvement. A traditional lens focuses on what the principal does and equates this action to the enactment of leadership. The application of a practice view of leadership which is being advanced by this study, encourages the focus to be placed on the action and interaction of school actors (not necessarily positional leaders) in the leadership process, to ascertain how leadership is enacted in the rural school context. The following section discusses the development of the school improvement discourse, particularly as a contextual possibility for studying the practice turn in leadership for rural schools.

Rural School Improvement

Defined as an “approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change” school improvement has been playing an integral role in the development of schools since the 1960s (Hopkins, 2001, p. 13). The school improvement movement was a direct response to changing economic and social conditions that prompted a move from policy makers to call for a more accountable education system that would facilitate improved student learning outcomes.

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The discipline of school improvement that is closely aligned to the effective schools research has gone through four phases of development since the mid-1960s. The first phase focused on the adoption of curriculum material, and “was intended to have a major impact on student achievement through the production and dissemination of exemplary curriculum materials” (Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins, & Springfield 2000, p. 208). This phase failed because teachers who were expected to implement the curriculum were not involved in its development. As a result, teachers handpicked areas of the curriculum to integrate into their teaching while ignoring the other areas of the new curriculum.

The second phase as outlined by Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins and Springfield (2000) covered most of the 1970’s and focused on documenting the “failure of the curriculum reform movement to affect practice” (p. 208). The authors make the point that the top down approach to change did not work and that teachers needed to be trained to work with the new material. The major finding of this research, perhaps not surprisingly, was that implementation of change does not happen automatically because of a legislative directive.

The third phase that happened in the 1970s to mid-1980s focused on successful school improvement initiatives. This phase included research that examined the implementation of large scale studies on school improvement (Hargreaves, 1984; Louis & Miles, 1990; Rosenhaltz, 1989). The fourth phase, dubbed “managing change,” can be traced to the mid-1980s and moved the focus away from the “study of change as phenomena to actually participating in school development” (Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins, & Springfield, 2000, p. 209). Its focus was on studying change as it is being brought about.

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School improvement in the Saskatchewan context. In his analysis of the Canadian provincial models and literature on school effectiveness and school improvement, Sackney (2007) indicated that “research and practice are focused on student learning and the need to accommodate diverse learners as well as an emphasis on a culture of continuous improvement” (p. 178). Speaking more specifically to the Saskatchewan context, Sackney (2007) makes the point that the School^{PLUS} framework was established as a means to reform the way schools operated in the province. The School^{PLUS} framework was the outcome of a 1999 task force established to ascertain the role of the school in meeting the needs of children and youth in the 21st Century. The framework called “for a new vision of schools as centers of learning, support and community for the children, youth and the families they serve” (Sackney, 2007, p. 177). Stemming from the School^{PLUS} framework was the Pre-K-12 Continuous Improvement Framework which was “intended to assist school division boards (divisions) in an annual cycle of strategic planning, monitoring and public reporting on the use of resources, strategic practices and the progress in improving the achievement outcomes of all Saskatchewan’s students” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 1). This strategic planning framework informed the school division’s continuous improvement plan, that further informed the learning improvement plan which was implemented at the school level.

In 2013, the Provincial Leadership Team (PLT) that consists of the Deputy Minister of Education, the Assistant Deputy Ministers, the 28 school divisions’ directors of education, and representatives from First Nation’s school systems collaboratively developed a new strategic planning framework, for the education sector. Dubbed the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), the sector wide plan took effect in 2014, with the aim of bringing “coherence and alignment to the priorities of the government, the ministry, the sector and the classroom”

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(Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2015, p. 77). The ESSP outlines five long term outcomes that the education sector aims to achieve by 2020. These outcomes speak to increasing the number of students that are at grade level for math, reading and writing, an improvement of the province's graduation rate and supporting the readiness of Kindergarten students for the primary grades (see figure 2.1). The corresponding improvement targets outlined in the ESSP identify specific targets that should be met.

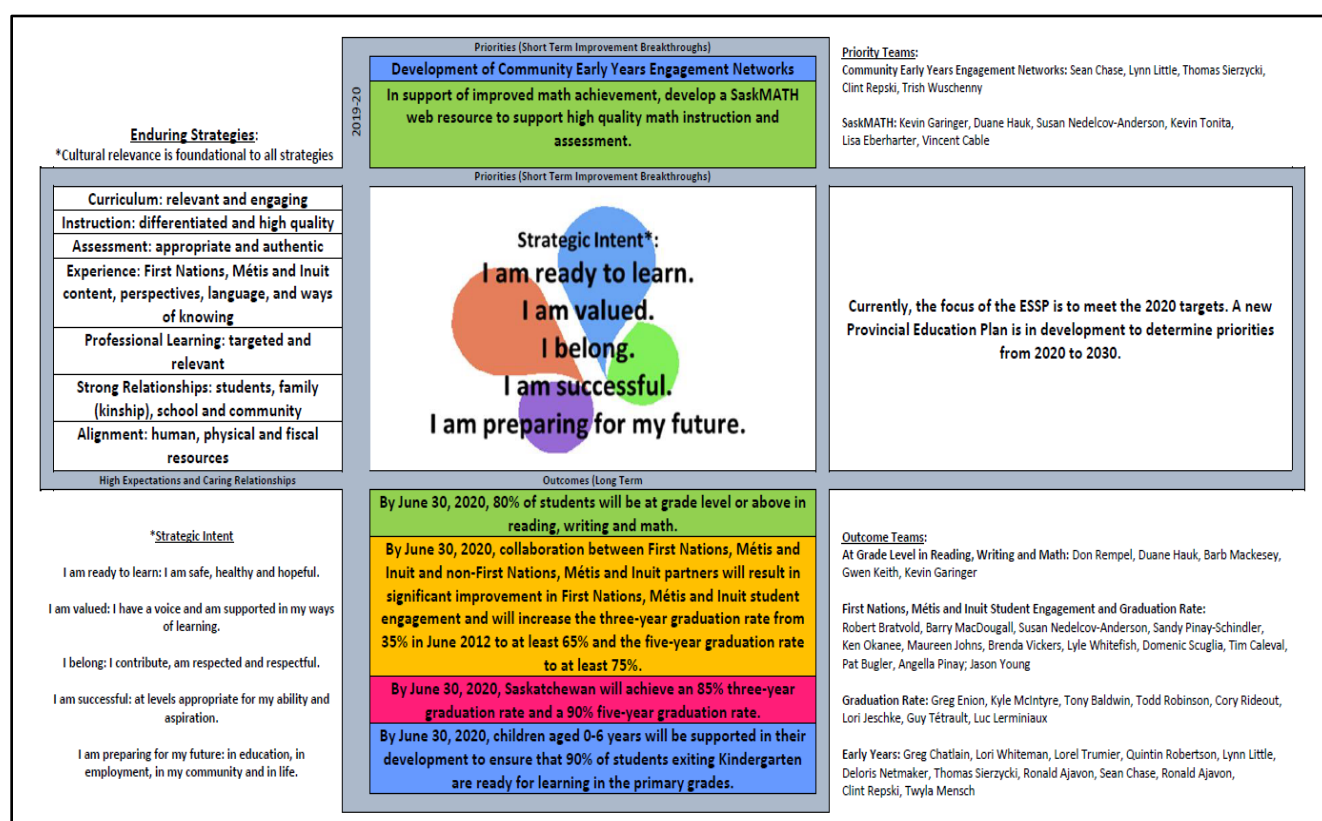


Figure 2.1 Education Sector Strategic Plan Level 1, Cycle 4 (2019-20)

Similar to the Continuous Improvement Framework, the ESSP informs the activities of the school divisions and by extension the targeted improvement initiatives of schools. The ESSP outcomes are driven by specific improvement targets which inform some of the improvement activities that are undertaken at the school level. Figure 2.2 outlines the connections between

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each level of the system. The school and classroom action plans feed into the school division action plans, which in turn feeds into the division's strategic plan that is tied to the ESSP long term outcomes.

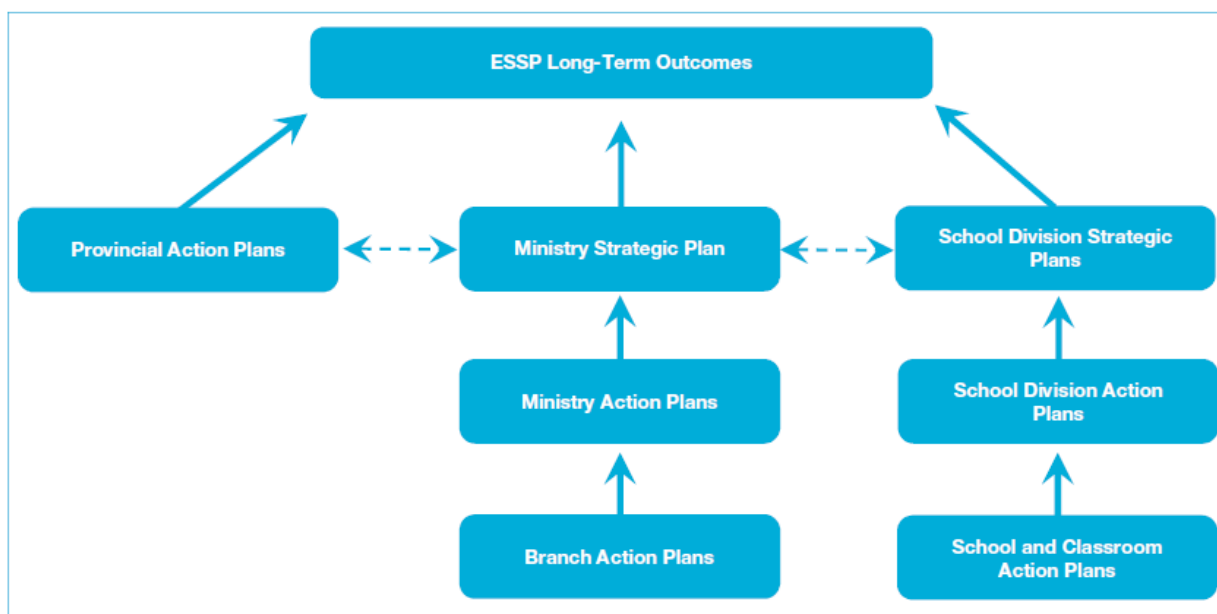


Figure 2.2 ESSP Reporting Framework. Adapted from Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2015 Report – Vol. 1, p. 84

Rural schools in Saskatchewan are therefore enabled and bound to the ESSP, as is any urban school in the province. Rural school improvement initiatives inevitably reflect the provincial and divisional direction set out in these plans. However, how these places enact improvement activities towards these ends, and whether they incorporate additional outcomes, are very much context specific, and respond to local need. It was very interesting to study how leadership practice was enacted within a rural school initiative that was contextually driven while also being aligned to an outcome of the provincial ESSP.

Bringing it all together: Rural school leadership and school improvement. With the aim of making schools more effective, school improvement initiatives play an integral role in the daily operations of learning institutions. Spillane and Seashore-Louis (2002), explained that student learning is key in school improvement initiatives, “hence school improvement has to be about improving student’s opportunities to learn in order to improve both easily measurable and subtle achievement” (p. 83). The context and the stage of development of a school plays an important role in the successful implementation of improvement activities. Sackney (2007) argues that “schools at different stages of development require different strategies not only to enhance their capacity and development but also to provide better education for their students” (p. 171). In response to this perspective, Howley (1997) advanced that a different approach is needed for improvement in rural education, arguing that “a changed perspective on the purposes of schooling is needed if educational researchers would help develop institutions that actually benefit rural communities” (p. 2). This call for place based inspired improvement in rural education pays attention to the context of the rural school by focusing on “the peculiarities of rural families, rural ways of living and working and local rural meanings and knowledge” (p. 3).

Leadership plays a key role in the implementation of school improvement initiatives. Research has consistently pointed to the strong relationship between leadership and school improvement (Harris, 2003, 2004). In speaking to the role of leadership in school improvement, Sackney (2007) made the point that leadership in schools is needed for improvement as it provides a “sense of vision and purpose, moral integrity, coherence and a culture necessary for improved teaching and learning to occur” (p. 179). School improvement projects that are for the most part change initiatives, call for a specific kind of leadership to guide the direction of these projects. The literature places a great deal of emphasis on the role of the individual leader in

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school improvement. Alternately, Harris (2003) states that “there is a growing recognition in increasingly complex contexts of educational change and accountability that deep and sustained school improvement will depend upon the leadership of many rather than the few” (p.1). It is this view of leadership that the practice approach to leadership proffers, one that pays attention to the contribution of all parties involved in the practice of leadership, not only the school principal.

Traditional understandings of the concept equate leadership to the behaviors, styles of leading and actions of the positional leader in an organization. Post-industrial understandings have sought to shift the focus of inquiry away from the individual leader to the activities and interactions of persons as they pursue mutual organizational goals. Indeed, the very nature of the rural school landscape has facilitated a collaborative approach to leadership, given resource and contextual constraints. However, the capturing of the shared leadership by default, has been regulated to the activities of positional leaders, even though there has been agreement in the literature of the shared and collaborative nature of leadership the process. This is perhaps due to the systematic socialization of society to look towards an individual in an organization to provide guidance for action.

Focusing on how leadership unfolds as a process requires an alternative frame of thinking, which does not limit the activities involved in the process to that of the positional leader. It requires paying attention to the tacit and taken for granted activities engaged in by rural school actors as they work towards a mutual goal. In this way, one may be able to get a clear understanding of how leadership is enacted through the contribution of all involved in its practice. The application of a practice lens to the phenomenon of leadership allowed me to pay attention to the tacit behaviors and interactions of actors as they engaged in leadership work. As it relates to rural school leadership and its role in the successful implementation of improvement

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projects, the application of practice theory provided a unique opportunity for a practical understanding of how leadership in the rural school context could be improved to the benefit of rural communities. The subsequent chapter provides the research methodology and methods that will be used to complete this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The research responded to the need for an alternative means of understanding leadership that moves beyond the leader-centric accounts that have been advanced in rural school leadership studies. More specifically this study explored how leadership happens during the implementation of a school improvement project in a rural K -12 school in Saskatchewan. The examination of the practice of rural school leadership was driven by a desire to understand the nature of the phenomenon and how its development can assist in rural school improvement. This chapter outlines the methodological assumptions that guided this exploration, through an articulation of the research methodology, research methods, as well as the epistemological and theoretical perspectives underpinning the inquiry.

Leadership-as-practice is embedded in the tacit and taken for granted activities of the persons involved in the practice (Raelin, 2016a). With this in mind, I employed a case study design along with elements of an ethnographic design to guide the research process. In this chapter, I demonstrate that this qualitative approach was appropriate for understanding this phenomenon. I also provide a description of the instruments that were used to collect data as well as the data analysis procedures that were employed in this study. Attention was also paid to the issue of ethics and the steps that I took to ensure that trustworthiness was maintained throughout this inquiry.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is leadership-as-practice manifested during the implementation of a school improvement project in one rural Saskatchewan school?

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2. What factors in the socio-material environment appear to influence how leadership-as-practice is enacted within the school improvement initiative in one rural Saskatchewan school?
3. How do the activities of leadership-as-practice appear to enable the successful implementation of the rural school improvement initiative?

The practice of leadership within a rural school context and during the implementation of a school improvement project was the phenomenon of interest. Characterizing leadership as a social practice allows the concept to be examined beyond the realm of a role-driven process. Applying the practice lens to the study of rural school leadership facilitated a nuanced understanding of the “how” of leadership, which is integral to the success of rural schools.

Research Framework

Guided by a qualitative approach to research, this inquiry was concerned with “how people make sense of their world and experiences they have in their world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13). The qualitative approach is ideal because my primary aim in this study was to understand how leadership is enacted in a rural school setting during the implementation of an improvement initiative. An alternative approach that focuses on the causal relationship between and among variables was not ideal for this study as my intention was not to provide a classification of or statistical model of leadership but to describe in detail how the practice of leadership is enacted in a rural school during the implementation of a school improvement initiative.

Crotty (1998) suggested that all qualitative research must be attentive to epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. Epistemology speaks to the philosophical assumptions on which a study is built specifically, “the bases of knowledge its nature and forms

and how it can be acquired and communicated to other human beings” (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 11).

In other words, epistemology brings to the fore how the researcher comes “to know what they know” (Crotty, 1998 p. 8). The theoretical perspective speaks to the researcher’s assumptions about “the human world and social life within that world” (Crotty 1998, p.7). This theoretical perspective informs the methodology chosen, which is the plan of action that guides the design of the inquiry and by extension the research methods employed. Finally, the research methods speak to the approaches used by the researcher to collect data, and to conduct the analysis and interpretation of the data. Figure 3.1 summarizes the research framework that guided this inquiry.

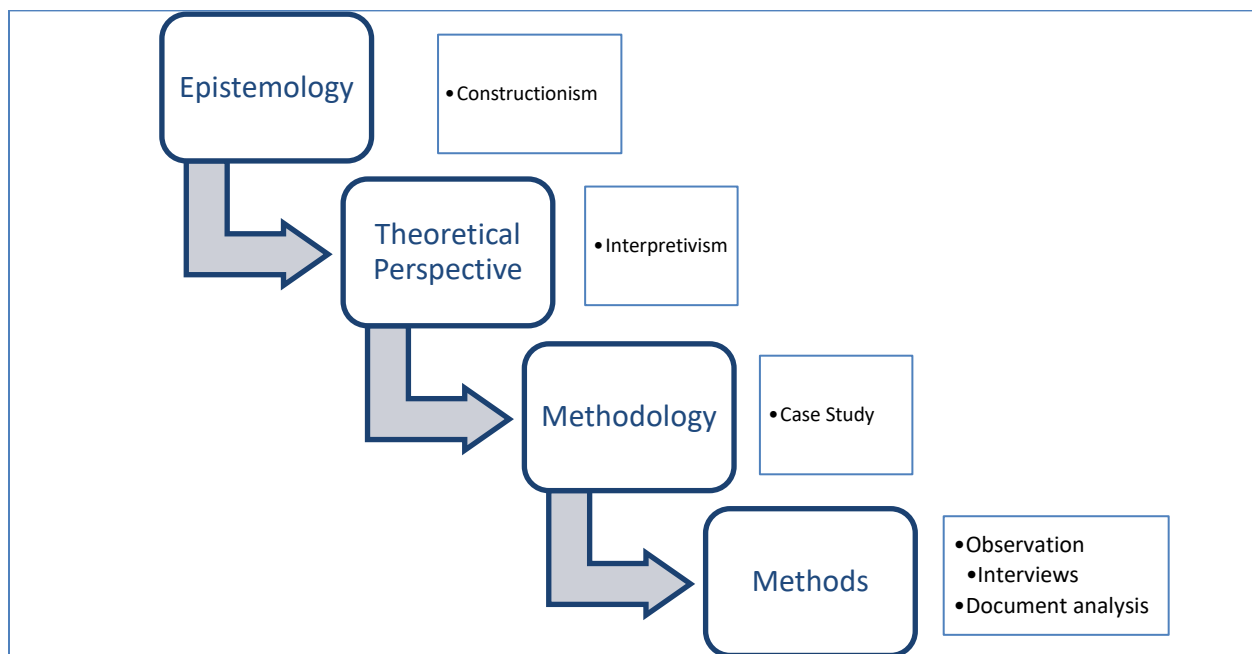


Figure 3.1 Research framework. Adapted from Crotty (1998)

Research Epistemology

A constructionist lens undergirded this study. Gutterman (2006) distinguished that a social constructivist lens advances a subjectivist view of knowledge with constructivism placing emphasis on individual biological and cognitive processes, and social constructionism locating

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knowledge in the domain of the social interchange. Crotty (1998) further explains that constructionism is the view “that all knowledge, and therefore meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their social world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). In other words, reality is not objective, as advanced by a positivist lens, but is shaped by people as they make and are shaped by their social and cultural environment (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1999). As a result, meaning in the social world is not discovered but is constructed and evidenced through the interaction of social actors.

The value in using a constructionist lens for this study was founded on the premise that leadership is a socially constituted phenomenon that is constructed between people as they interact with each other and their environment. This is a useful lens through which to understand the phenomenon of leadership, that of a practice, constituted by social actors rather than based on the traits or behavior of the positional leader. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) pointed out that social constructionist studies of leadership exhibit two characteristics: (a) a move away from leader-centric approaches to understanding leadership, and (b) paying attention to “leadership as a co-constructed reality, in particular, the processes and outcomes of interaction between and among social actors” (p. 175). Ultimately in adopting this epistemological lens, I assumed that the phenomenon of leadership can be studied by examining the words, actions and interactions (human and non-human) that are contained in the leadership practice of rural school actors as they engage in the implementation of a school improvement initiative. The activities that may be found in the construction of leadership practice as advanced by Raelin (2016a) include: designing role, scanning, mobilizing, weaving, stabilizing, inviting, unleashing and reflecting. These activities are brought into being through the conversations and interaction of actors that

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are party to the practice of leadership. For instance, in the designing role activity, actors discuss, accept or refuse tasks to move a project along, and as a consequence, are actively constructing and enacting their understandings of leadership-as-practice as they move this activity to a particular end.

Theoretical Perspective

An interpretivist theoretical perspective guided this research. My intention in this study was to understand how the practice of leadership is manifested in a rural school setting. To achieve this understanding, an observation of the action and interaction of participants involved in the practice of leadership was required, after which I interpreted those observations to make claims on how I saw the practice of leadership unfolding. Therefore, in this inquiry particular attention was paid to the provision of an understanding of the “lived experience of research participants, instead of abstract generalizations” (Glense & Peshkin, 1991, p. 19). Unlike the positivist approach which holds that “reality exists out there and is observable, stable, and measurable” an interpretive approach advances that “reality is socially constructed (and that) there are multiple realities of a single event” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). According to Creswell (2014) these “subjective meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas” (p. 8). A key feature of the interpretivist perspective is “verstehen” which means “understanding” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 273). Paton (2015) explains that verstehen speaks to the importance of “understanding the meaning of action from the actor’s point of view” (p. 56) in the research process. The task of the researcher then is to “unearth that meaning” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 134) in order to understand the world of social actors and the phenomenon being investigated. Cohen et al. (2011) advanced that for an interpretivist researcher “the social world can only be understood

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from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated” (p.15). Drawing from this perspective, in this inquiry, meaning or knowledge was socially constructed and was found in the action and interaction of social actors engaged in the practice of leadership in a rural school.

Research Design

Creswell (2013) explains that the research design is the plan that guides an inquiry. Drawing from the theoretical and epistemological assumptions described above, a qualitative approach was chosen to inform the design of this study. A qualitative research approach facilitates an in-depth and detailed interrogation of social phenomenon as well as provides insights into how individuals experience and interact with their social world (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2015). This study embraced the following characteristics of a qualitative research: naturalistic setting, researcher as key instrument, inductive data analysis, emergent design, and reflexivity.

Natural Setting. Qualitative researchers engage participants in their natural setting where the participants experience the phenomenon being studied. Patton (2015) explains that qualitative research takes place in the “real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to affect, control or manipulate what is unfolding naturally” (p. 48). Informed by this characteristic I joined the participants of this study in their school as they planned and worked on the improvement initiative. This enabled me to talk with team members as they worked and observe them as they engaged in the practice of leadership.

Researcher as Key Instrument. As the researcher I was the key instrument for data collection and analysis in this inquiry. Creswell (2013) points out that “qualitative researchers

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collect data themselves by examining documents, observing behavior or interviewing participants” (p. 234). Grounded in the premise that one of the fundamental goals of this research was gaining an understanding of how leadership is enacted in the rural school context, I collected data through the examination of documents used in meetings, observing the behavior of actors as they engaged with each other and with materials at the research site, as well as talking to participants about their actions and interactions during, before and after project meetings. I analyzed the output from these data collection activities, taking care to build in opportunities for self-reflection.

Inductive Data Analysis. The third tenet embraced by this inquiry concerned the use of complex reasoning through inductive logic to provide a holistic account of how the practice of leadership is enacted (Merriam, 2002). Through an inductive analysis approach, I reviewed the data gathered from the field notes, interview transcripts, notes from pictures and documents analyzed to build patterns, categories and themes. I worked back and forth between the themes until a comprehensive list of themes was established. I also chose to utilize Raelin’s (2016a) framework of the eight characteristics of leadership as practice, (designing, scanning, mobilizing, weaving, stabilizing, inviting, unleashing and reflecting) to provide some guidance for data analysis. However, I remained open to emergent themes that could extend this framework and open new possibilities for understanding leadership-as-practice.

Emergent Design. In describing the emergent design of qualitative studies, Creswell (2013) explained that “the initial plan for the research cannot be tightly prescribed and some of the processes may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (p. 235). According to Patton (2015), this design is “open to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and or situations change; avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate

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responsiveness; pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge” (p. 46). While I had specified an initial focus in my planned observations and my initial guiding interview questions, the dynamic nature of the real world necessitated that I be open to an emergent design that could provide me with some flexibility. For instance, though I entered this inquiry using the activities identified by Raelin (2016) as a starting framework to see how the practice of leadership was enacted, I was not limited to looking only for these activities.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the “process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, ‘the human as instrument’” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). This characteristic required me to be cognizant that my background, culture and experiences had the potential to shape the meanings I brought to the data. As such, through the use of field notes and memos I reflected on my role and personal influences as I engaged with the data and took steps to explicitly outline my position in this inquiry, by explaining the reasons for selecting the participants, describing the context of the study and the values and assumptions that informed the collection and analysis of the data. In keeping with this characteristic, my position as the researcher was shared in Chapter One. This information allows readers to better understand how I arrived at my interpretation of the data.

Case Study

Practice-based studies are grounded in the idea that a better, more detailed understanding of phenomenon “requires moving closer to action and considering what is routinely done by actors as they engage in these activities” (Sergi, 2012, p. 11). Getting to these activities requires a research design that allows for the examination of the lived experience of research participants. Consequently, this exploratory inquiry utilized an instrumental case design (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Stake, 1995). An instrumental case study design is used when attention is being

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paid to a specific issue instead of the case itself, allowing the case to become the vehicle through which a better understanding of the issue is gained (Stake, 1995). A case study design provides an in-depth analysis of a bounded case such as a program or process (Creswell, 2014). Stake (2005) pointed out that a case study is defined by “interest in the individual not by the methods of inquiry used” (p. 443). He added that his definition of case studies is drawn from a number of research methods including ethnographic methods. Stake (1995) further explained that in conducting a case study, researchers enter the site “with a sincere interest in learning how they (participants) function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn” (p. 1).

This study provided a case analysis of the practice of leadership during the implementation of an improvement project in a rural school setting. A key characteristic of a case study is the attention paid to the case of a group of actors in a rural school as they implement the improvement project. The case constitutes an appropriate context for exploring how the practice of leadership is socially constituted. My aim was not to describe the culture of participants in this study, but to understand the activities of school actors involved in the project to get to their lived experience as they engaged in work. Influenced by Cervani’s (2011) work, which examined shared leadership in two manufacturing companies, this inquiry did not capture all of the activities of the school actors; rather, it focused on the “instances of work” in which the practice of leadership could be found related to the school improvement initiative. More specifically, attention was focused on team meetings, and/or other school events where the improvement initiative was the focus of discussion. This stance facilitated an observation of the participants as they planned, reported on and implemented the improvement initiative.

Research Methods

Patton (2015) pointed out that “qualitative methods facilitate the study of issues in depth and detail” (p. 22). Guided by this desire to get a detailed picture of how leadership is enacted in the selected case, this study utilized a research design that focused on triangulation of a number of research methods, including observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The concept of triangulation in research methods involves the confirmation or cross checking of the accuracy of the data obtained from one source with that of another (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). The use of these multiple sources ensured that the data collected was rich and provided useful findings. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the purpose, target, procedures for data collection and the data content that was provided from each of the methods used in this study.

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Table: 3.1

Methods Matrix

Method	Purpose	Target	Procedures for Data collection	Data Content
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Record situations as they happen - Record the meanings of these events at the time for the study group participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Activities - Behaviors of people and group - Conversations - Settings, participation structures - Interactions with each other - Interactions with non-human objects (eg meeting minutes, furniture) - Instances of signaling, inviting, unleashing, weaving and reflecting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transcripts of meetings observed - Written or taped field notes - Written or taped records of informal interviews and conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Depiction of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Physical settings o Acts o Activities of leadership-as-practice o Interaction Patterns o Meanings o Beliefs o Emotions
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To provide in-depth information on issues, or courses of actions that were observed in the meeting - To access historical elements of the practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key informants or topic experts that are involved in the meeting being observed - Identification of instances of the activities of leadership-as-practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Semi-Structured interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Answers to open-ended questions that capture background information on context, and improvement project, as well as how leadership unfolds
Content analysis of secondary text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elicitation of themes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Documents - Artifacts - Identification of instances of the activities of leadership-as-practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Repeated observations - Development of Analytical categories - Coding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coded or sorted text

Note. Adapted from “Designing and conducting ethnographic research,” by M. Le Compte & J.

Schensul, 1999, p. 128.

Observation. Commonly used in qualitative research, observation can take one of four forms. Creswell (2013) pointed out that the form taken, namely complete participant, participant

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as observer, non-participant observer and complete observer is dependent on the research purpose and questions. For the purposes of this study I took on the role of a non-participant observer. Commonly used in ethnographic research design, observation allowed me to get close to the object of study by becoming immersed in the day to day lives of the participants to observe how leadership was enacted. Bispo (2015) advanced that observation “allows the researcher to access the field and check while the constituent activities of practice are running or going in their naturalistic way” (p. 316). This approach allowed me to formulate my own version of what was occurring and how the practice of leadership emerged as participants engaged in work on the project. As outlined in Table 3.1, my interest was the interactions, activities, conversations and behaviors of the participants as they planned and implemented the project. As a non-participant observer, I attended planning meetings and other relevant events to observe the project team as I provided an insider and outsider view of the practice. An insider view was provided as I got close enough to the practice to capture the tacit meanings and ways of acting that were encompassed in the practice. This insider perspective was attained through my attendance of the team meetings as an observer. It is important to note that my very presence at the meetings could have shaped the direction of the project meetings; this influence could be the source of a potential bias in this study. On the other hand, an outsider view was also provided as I interpreted what was happening in the practice as a non-member of the team.

Interviews. Merriam (2009) pointed out that interviews are necessary in cases where it is not possible to “observe behavior, feelings or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 88). As it relates to the study of practices, Bispo (2015) explains that interviews allow the researcher to capture in general “the speeches, the memories and the knowledge people carry with them or have about a certain topic or subject” (p. 316). As highlighted in the previous

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section, my study was interested in understanding how the practice of leadership is enacted in the implementation of a rural school improvement initiative. The use of interviews allowed me “to confirm, confront or access historical aspects” of the practice (Bispo, 2015, p. 316). Through the use of semi-structured interviews, I explored each team member’s perception of what transpired in the meetings. During the interviews I also probed whether the interviewee had any historical information held in their memories that could shed light on the enactment of the initiative and on the practice of leadership. One of the limitations of the use of the interviews in studies that hold practices as the unit of analysis is the inability to “access the dynamics of a practice from the discourse of others, considering that it will be a reporting of something passed through and that it is subject to memory lapses, distortions of the facts, possibility of omission and even lack of veracity of some data” (Bispo, 2015, p. 316). The use of triangulation of multiple research methods helped to offset this limitation. The interview protocols (Appendix A and B) which were used to guide the interview process were emergent and based on the nature of the initiative and the role participants played in the improvement team. However, all interview guides were aligned with Raelin’s (2016a) eight activities.

Document Analysis. An analysis of documents and records related to the implementation of the program was also undertaken. Glense and Peshkin (1991) suggest that documents can be used to corroborate observations made as well as data gathered from interviews. These documents include meeting minutes, memos, school survey findings, project emails, the project’s proposal and project reports. The data captured from the documents were sorted and coded looking for both the activities of a practice advanced by Raelin (2016a) as well as emergent themes that were gleaned.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) outlined several activities that should be considered in the data collection process. These include locating and gaining access to the site, identifying the sample, collecting data, and recording information. The following section outlines how these steps guided the data collection process of this inquiry.

Before conducting this study, I completed the application of the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioral Research Ethics Board to get approval for the completion of this study, the approval certificate can be found in Appendix C. Data were collected over a three-month period, with weekly visits to the school during the data collection period.

Population and Sample Selection

The sample chosen in qualitative research is selected purposively rather than randomly (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Merriam (2009) also pointed out that "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). Merriam (2009) further pointed out that a first step in the sampling process is the identification of a selection criteria to be used for the site and or people to be studied. The criteria selected should match the purpose of the study and guide the "identification of information rich case" (p. 78). It is also important in listing the criteria to indicate why the criteria used is important.

In this exploratory study the criterion that was used to determine the site being studied was "rurality". The school selected was located in a rural area that has a population that was less than 5000 persons and was at least 100 km away from the urban centre of Saskatoon. This criterion was essential as the rural school context forms the background against which this study

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was framed. A second criterion was that the school selected should be working on an improvement initiative driven by the Ministry of Education's School improvement plans or a local based initiative that was being implemented by the school based on a specific need identified by school actors. A full description of the context and the improvement initiative is found in Chapter Four. This criterion was key as I was interested in looking at the practice of leadership that were in play during the implementation of such a project.

A rural school division was purposively selected from the 28 school divisions based on the general selection criteria for this study. Specifically, the division was selected based on its composition of rural schools that were at least 100 km away from the urban centre of Saskatoon, where I was located. This criterion facilitated ease of access to the research site yet remained far enough from Saskatoon to be somewhat distanced from its urban influence. I selected the divisions based on proximity to Saskatoon and moved outward from there until I accessed a Director who was interested in supporting this study. The Director of Education was contacted through an email letter. A follow-up phone call was made to schedule a meeting to discuss the project and the possibility of conducting the study in the school division. During this discussion the Director of Education gave permission for the study to be conducted in his school division. He identified several schools that may have been able to facilitate the study but explained that the final decision of whether a school participated or not was the school's. I contacted all the school principals identified by the Director and set up a meeting to discuss the project with them and their willingness to participate in the study. After meeting with all the school principals, the Douglas School (pseudonym) was purposively selected based on its location (rural setting), its involvement in school improvement initiatives and the school personnel's availability and willingness to participate in the research.

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Gaining the confidence of the division's Director of Education and the participants who were involved in the project played a key role in gaining access to the site. I gained the confidence of the Director by sharing with him the objectives of the study and the value that it added to an understanding of rural school leadership. As it relates to the participants of the study engaged in the implementation of the improvement initiative, I sought to build rapport by explaining the objectives of the study before the actual data collection phase of the study was undertaken. Through an information session held on my first visit to the school, I shared with the participants the purpose of the inquiry, the methods I would use, and what I hoped to achieve from the time spent with them in the school. All the teachers agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent form located in Appendix D.

Overview of Participants

Participants for the study were the school actors who were working on the implementation of the project. These participants were involved in the practice being observed; it was their action and interaction that formed the core of the practice of leadership being examined. Therefore, speaking to and observing the team members was essential to understanding leadership as practice. The initiative focused on the implementation of the personalized and blended learning philosophy aimed at improving the learning opportunities for students. The persons directly involved in the day-to-day implementation of the initiative were the principal, five teachers from the elementary school and two final year teacher candidates who were assigned to the school for their extended practica. Also involved in an indirect way were a full-time teacher and a half time teacher who supported the Student Support Teacher (SST). Both teachers participated in the elementary school meetings that usually dealt with adjustments to the project. Also interviewed were the learning philosophy supervisor for the school division and the

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superintendent for the school. These persons were engaged as participants of the study because of their role in the planning of the initiative and the support they provided during the implementation of the initiative. Table 3.2 provides a demographic overview of the participants of the study.

In order to help describe the context and clarify the language that may be used in the findings, it is important to describe an innovative leadership team approach that was developed to support the school. To support the overall implementation of the learning philosophy of the school division, a triad team was put in place that operates as a collaborative resource team in the school. The triad is made up of the principal, the learning philosophy mentor and the Student Support Teacher. According to the Division's website the vision of the triad was that of a team that would facilitate and celebrate growth in all learners through the transfer of responsibility. The triad was also expected to work collaboratively to model and support best teaching practices while maintaining effective communication and ensuring that all stakeholders felt included and supported.

Denise was the Principal of the school. She has been in the role for approximately seven months. She came to the position with experience in the implementation of the learning philosophy in her former classroom as well as serving as a learning philosophy mentor at her previous school. As administrator she also served on the school's triad.

Stacy had been a teacher at the school for nine years. She taught kindergarten half time and English Language Arts (ELA) the other half of the time. She was one of the three teachers who formed the ELA teaching team. She also taught several projects during the term.

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Dahlia had been a teacher at the school for 19 years. She taught the remaining half-time of Stacy's position, and taught ELA when Stacy was teaching kindergarten. She also taught projects. Dahlia had children attending the school who were experiencing the initiative. She had a unique perspective as a parent and teacher in implementation of the initiative.

Tamika is the third member of the ELA team. She had been with the school for the past eight years. She was the Student Support teacher (SST). Sixty percent of her time was dedicated to SST while 40% was spent teaching ELA and projects. She was also a member of the school's triad.

Carla had been a teacher at the school for the past 21 years. She is one of two teachers who formed the Math team for the initiative and also had select projects that she taught during project time. She also worked with the Student Leadership team. She had a child attending the High School.

Shawna was the second teacher in the math team who had been with the school for the past 5 years. She was the school's learning philosophy mentor and as such was a member of the triad. Thirty percent of her time was spent doing learning philosophy mentor duties while the remaining 70% was spent teaching Math and projects. As the learning philosophy mentor she was trained in the implementation of the learning philosophy and was expected to spend time supporting the teachers in the implementation of the learning philosophy.

Marie and Carrene were two teacher candidates from the University of Saskatchewan. They were completing their extended practica at the school for 1 term. Marie was assigned to Stacy and a second high school teacher while Carrene was assigned to Carla. Based on their

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assignments, Marie worked with the ELA team while Carrene worked with the Math team.

Carrene was also able to work on a project with Carla.

Karen had been teaching at the school for six years. She was the physical education teacher. She taught students both in the elementary and high school. She attended school at Douglas and returned to teach after completion of her Bachelor of Education degree.

Lisa supported Tamika in the completion of the SST tasks. She also worked with the Student leadership team and taught at the high school.

Keisha was the learning philosophy supervisor for the division. She supported the school's administrator, the triad and learning philosophy mentor in the implementation of the learning philosophy.

Paul was the superintendent of the school. He served as teacher and principal of the school and had children attending the elementary section of the school. He provided technical support to the administrator as she transitioned into the principal role.

Table 3.2.

Participants' demographic information

Name	Post	Work Experience
Denise	Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Been at Douglas for seven months- Principal- Forms part of the school's triad
Stacy	Kindergarten Teacher ELA Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Been at the school since for 10 years- Teaches Kindergarten and ELA
Dahlia	Teacher (Half Time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Teaches ELA half time with Stacy- Has been with the school for 20 years

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Carla	Math Teacher Student Leadership Team Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has been with the school since 1998 (21 years) - Teaches Math - Also leads the SLT
Shawna	Learning Philosophy Mentor Math Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teaches Math - Has been with the school since for five years - Did her internship at the school and was mentored by Tamika - Also holds the position of the personalized and blended learning mentor - Forms part of the school's triad - 30% Learning Mentor 70 % Teacher
Tamika	Student Support Teacher ELA Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - English Teacher - Student Support teacher - 60% SST and 40% teacher - Forms part of the school's triad - Has been with the school eight years
Lisa	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports Tamika in SST tasks for the school - Teaches at the high school - Has been with the school in various capacities for eight years
Marie	Intern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student intern from U of S - Mentored by Stacy, and a High school teacher - Worked with the ELA team on the project
Carrene	Intern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student intern from U of S - Works with the Math team - Mentored by Carla
Paul	Superintendent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Superintendent past six years - Served as Principal for six years, prior to that was a teacher at the school for seven years - Has kids attending the school
Karen	Physical Education Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Past Student of the school - Grew up in the community - Has been teaching at Douglas for six years
Keisha	Learning Philosophy Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides support to the Principal - Provides support to the Learning Philosophy Mentor

The Data Collection Process

Observations: Looking at how leadership unfolds. The data collected included observation notes that were taken during the meeting that were considered relevant to the practice of leadership. These observations formed the field notes that were written with the support of an observational protocol (Creswell 2013). This protocol contained a header that provided information about the meeting being observed, a descriptive notes section that chronologically detailed the activities as they unfolded, and a corresponding reflective notes column that detailed my thoughts and reflections about the activities and process see Appendix E. During the observations of the meeting I watched for the eight activities advanced by Raelin (2016a) namely designing, scanning, mobilizing, weaving, stabilizing, inviting, unleashing and reflecting in the interactions of the participants as they engaged in the meeting. Each observation lasted for the duration of the meeting. I also recorded the audio of the meetings, to capture the conversation exchanges that were happening in the meeting.

Meeting Descriptions. Five meetings were observed over the data collection period. The following section provides an overview of what happened in which meeting as well as who was in attendance at the meetings.

Meeting A: This was the first meeting held during the first month of the school year. This was held on a professional development day, which meant that the project meeting took up a portion of the day's proceedings. The project meeting lasted for approximately two hours. At this meeting the team discussed the specifics of how self-directed time would roll out and who would work with which groups of students during this period of the day. Self-directed time was a structural change that was made to the previous schedule of class to allow students to work on their selected learning objectives. The group also discussed and decided on an approach to

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facilitate more transition time for students between self-directed time and the physical education class. Time was also spent looking at the things that could be celebrated and challenges experienced so far with the partial implementation of the initiative. In attendance were Denise, Carrene, Marie, Dahlia, Shawna, Carla, Karen and Tamika.

Meeting B: The second meeting was held in the second week of the second month of the implementation of the initiative. At the time of the meeting the project had been fully implemented a week before with the addition of a period of time (self-directed time) in which students were expected to select and work on completing tasks from their other sessions such as from ELA or Math, under the supervision of a few teachers. This was an early morning meeting called to see how the teachers had been experiencing self-directed time to date. A survey was done by one of the teachers in preparation for the meeting. The teacher had spoken to a couple of the students to see what their experience in self-directed time had been. The meeting started with this feedback. Teachers were then asked to share how self-directed time was progressing for them. The meeting lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The team made decisions on strategies that could be used to keep students on task as well as some classroom management issues. In attendance were Stacy, Tamika, Denise, Shawna, Carrene, Marie Karen, Dahlia, Carla,

Meeting C: The third meeting was a collaboration meeting that was held after school, once the teachers had done their customary goodbye wave to students. The meeting was held in response to challenges being experienced during self-directed time. The teachers decided that they would put strategies in place to assist students who were struggling with the initiative. The principal was not in attendance at this meeting. Present were Dahlia, Carla, Tamika, Shawna, Stacy and Carrene. One teacher Dahlia compiled a document that categorized challenges faced

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along with possible means of addressing them. This document served as an agenda of sorts as it served to structure the meeting.

Meeting D: The fourth meeting was held on a Professional Development day in the third month of the implementation project. This meeting was not a long one as three team members were missing. During this meeting teachers discussed the general direction in which SDT was going. Two members of the ELA team shared with the group the planned changes they were going to discuss in their ELA meeting later in the day.

Meeting E: This meeting was held after the general team meeting and involved the ELA team. Three of the teachers were present – Dahlia, Stacy and Marie. The fourth teacher Shawna was participated in the meeting via phone. In the ELA team meeting the teachers used a document that was compiled by one teacher as an agenda to guide their discussion. They wanted to adjust the way in which ELA was offered with a few more strategies that would improve the student experience with the initiative.

Interviews capturing participants' views. Data were collected through the interviews that were held. I arranged with participants a convenient time for the semi-structured interviews, after the project meeting was held. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. The participants who were involved in the day to day running of the project, namely the teachers and principal, were interviewed twice. An initial interview was conducted during the first month of the project to gather background information on the project, and descriptions of participants' roles in the project. These data were important for understanding the context within which the project was being implemented. A second interview was conducted with these participants after I had observed two team meetings and the project was fully implemented. This second interview

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allowed me to talk to the participants about what was happening in the meetings observed, to query the actions that were taken, to capture how participants saw leadership being enacted, and to clarify any points that were unclear to me in the observations of meetings. One teacher and the SST support teacher were interviewed once only, because of their support role in the project. While they participated in the project meetings, they played a more supportive role in the implementation of the project. They provided historical information about the implementation of projects in the school as well as their understanding of how they saw leadership unfolding. The learning supervisor and the school's superintendent were also interviewed. They were interviewed once with the aim of getting further information about the history of the school and the conceptualization of the project. One interview was conducted with the University of Saskatchewan teacher candidates to capture their understanding of the project and how leadership was being enacted during its implementation. Two group interviews were conducted with the school's triad, in their capacity as the senior leadership team of the school. The interviews generally lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Comprised of the principal, the learning philosophy mentor and the student support teacher, this group provided technical support on the ground for the implementation of the project. These interviews provided background information into how the project unfolded as well as the rationale behind the steps being taken in the implementation of the project. The participants also reviewed their interviews and signed a transcript release form which can be found in Appendix F.

Document Analysis: The review of project documents. Data were collected from a number of documents. I was provided with literature about the project from the Principal, including leaflets that were sent home to parents explaining the changes that would be made in September, the school's handbook, and general information about the project. I also accessed

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documents that were made available on the division's website about the project. Emails that were shared among the team members that captured major points discussed in a meeting as well as those that captured how persons were feeling about the project were also reviewed. My notes from the analysis of these documents were captured

Capturing the data collected. Using the observational protocol, hand-written notes, were made of the observations of the meetings. All hand written notes were typed and saved electronically. I regularly reflected on the day's data collection, through a reflective journal. The audio of the project meetings, and interviews were also recorded, transcribed and saved electronically. The notes captured from each document were captured on the document summary forms and stored electronically.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the data sources, namely field notes from participant observations, transcripts from interviews and meetings, reflective journals and notes from document analysis in this inquiry were voluminous. As such, a process for managing the data was needed. This process involved the transcription of audio recordings of the interviews and meetings, and the typing of field notes, reflections and document analysis notes. All files were saved electronically using the date they were recorded and data type as the title of the electronic file. For example the transcribed data from a meeting were saved as: March 21 2018 – Transcribed Meeting Audio. This process allowed the data to be accessible in a standardized form to facilitate the analysis process. All files were saved to the qualitative data analysis tool, NVivo which was used to store, code, retrieve and make comparisons in the data.

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Qualitative data analysis speaks to those activities that facilitate the preparation and organization of data, the reduction of this data into themes through a process of coding, and the representation of these themes in tables, figures or a discussion (Creswell, 2013). Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis as a guide I reviewed field notes, reflections, meeting transcripts, interview transcripts and document notes, looking for patterns that would help me formulate my themes, essentially to make sense of the data. It should be noted that the analysis process was an iterative one as analysis began during the process of collecting data as I interacted with participants. While collecting the data, I picked up indications of the activities advanced by Raelin (2016a). I used memos to record my thoughts and specific observations at the time, which have been incorporated in the overall analysis.

The process of data analysis was not a linear one. As Creswell (2013) pointed out, it requires the researcher to move in analytical circles. I engaged in this process using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases to guide the thematic analysis of data, namely 1) familiarizing yourself with your data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing the themes, 5) defining and naming the themes and 6) producing the report.

Familiarizing yourself with your data. Having engaged in the process of transcribing the data, enabled me to become familiar with the data. After uploading the data in Nvivo, I reviewed the data electronically and highlighted sections, phrases, or key concepts that stood out, also making notes or memos in the documents electronically. It should be noted that some of these notes and memos were also made while I transcribed the data.

Generating initial codes. After memoing the transcripts, I used the notes and memos as a guide to describe and classify the data generating initial codes. This first cycle coding saw me

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using the activities identified by Raelin (2016) that can be found in the practice of leadership. As a starting point, I combed through the meeting transcripts and my observation field notes, coding evidence of these activities in the text. I also looked for emergent codes that revealed themselves out of multiple iterations of data review. I then coded the interviews, document notes and my reflective field notes identifying segments of meaningful information for the study. Through this process I generated approximately 130 codes.

Searching for themes. From these codes I then engaged in the process of data reduction by identifying overarching themes that would align to the focus of my inquiry. In this process I started to comb through the codes, grouping them according to similarities, and relationships to form overarching themes and sub-themes. At the end of this process I ended up with 53 themes.

Reviewing themes. In this phase I engaged in a further reduction of the themes and sub-themes identified, reviewing their description and connecting them to the research questions that informed this inquiry. In this process I also found myself combining and recoding some of the earlier codes identified as the themes and patterns in the data became clearer. At the end of this process, seven overarching themes were identified.

Defining and naming themes. The seven overarching themes identified were leadership as practice, factors that facilitate leadership as practice, thoughts on leadership, the nature of the initiative, problem solving vignettes, the context and a miscellaneous category. The miscellaneous category captured those pieces of data that did not fit into the other themes, however they captured an element that kept re-occurring in the data. These themes were used to guide my thinking as I interpreted the data in light of the research questions.

Producing the report. Using the themes identified in my analysis, I then used the data extracts from the different themes to tell the story of how leadership-as-practice occurred during the implementation of the improvement initiative. The data extracts were used to tell the story at two levels. The first level provided a description of the rural and school context within which the improvement project unfolded as well as a description of the project and how it unfolded. At the second level, the data extracts were used to capture how leadership-as-practice unfolded and how the factors in the social and material environment enabled leadership as practice.

Establishing Trustworthiness

A key determinant of the value of qualitative research is the extent to which the findings of research are trustworthy. Creswell (2013) posited that qualitative researchers should engage in validation strategies that showcase the steps taken to facilitate the accuracy of their studies. Merriam (2009) outlines five elements that are used to establish rigor in qualitative research, namely the researcher's presence, the nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, the triangulation of data, the interpretation of perceptions, and rich thick description. For their part, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four criteria for trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To document rigor in relation to this inquiry I undertook the following validation strategies that are in keeping with those outlined by Creswell (2013), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Merriam (2009) and Patton (2015).

Triangulation. This approach relates to the extent to which several methods are used to gather data, facilitating multiple ways of looking at the phenomenon under investigation. This is a key strategy used to ensure validity, reliability and consistency in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Paton, 2015). The use of multiple data collection methods enabled the data collected to be as rich as possible, providing useful findings. For this inquiry, I

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used three methods to facilitate this process, namely participant observation, in depth interviews and document analysis. The use of these methods facilitated the collection of thick descriptions of the activities of the practice of leadership which were found in the context of this study.

Member Checking. Member checking, or member validation, is another useful means of facilitating internal validity or credibility. Using this approach, I forwarded transcripts of interviews to participants to verify, add, or delete information to ensure they were comfortable with their responses. I also used the second interview with each participant to clarify any points that were unclear in the data that was previously collected. According to Creswell (2013) this approach allowed participants to judge the accuracy and credibility of the data collected.

Rich Thick Descriptions. Thick descriptions refer to “descriptions that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action” (Denzin 1989, p. 39 as cited in Glense, 2006, p. 27). This strategy involved the outlining of detailed descriptions of participants and the setting of this study. Creswell (2013) indicated that this approach speaks to the transferability of the data and allows readers to use the detailed descriptions to make comparisons in other settings. This approach further allows readers to establish the degree of similarity “between this case and the case to which the findings may be transferred” (Patton, 2015, p. 265). Anonymity and confidentiality remained through the masking of identities or other markers that could identify individuals or site locations.

Reflexivity. The fourth strategy that I employed was to ensure that I reflected on my role as a researcher in this study. In so doing I have explained my biases, dispositions and assumptions regarding this study in Chapter One. Merriam (2009) posited that it is important that

readers are aware of these elements that I bring to the study in order to understand how I may have arrived at my interpretation of the data.

Peer and Expert Scrutiny. Another strategy that was engaged in is that of peer and expert scrutiny. A number of individuals, including my supervisor, committee members and colleagues (current and previous doctoral candidates) reviewed my analysis of the anonymous data to validate or confirm my findings. This approach is in keeping with Merriam's (2009) claim that this strategy allowed these persons to review the data in relation to my findings and assess whether my findings were plausible.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns are key consideration in the implementation of any research. Given the data collection methods utilized in this study, steps were taken to ensure that permission was sought and gained from the participants, to ensure the confidentiality of participants and to minimize any real or perceived risk. To meet this requirement the research proposal was submitted to the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Ethics Review Board. The research proposal ethics application outlined the steps that were taken to ensure that participants were treated respectfully, with dignity and care throughout the study. Included in this application was a copy of examples of guiding questions used during the semi-structured interviews. Participant consent forms were also presented in the ethics application that outlined the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time, the purpose of the study, the steps taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants, the risks associated with participation in the study, and the benefits to be gained if any by participants in the study were included. As noted earlier, the ethics approval certificate can be found in Appendix C.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the study's design, methodology and research methods. Starting from the purpose of this study a case was made for the application of a case study design this practice based study. The major activities that were undertaken in this study were also outlined. Attention was paid to detailing the methods that will be used to gather and analyze the data for this study. Steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and ethical conduct in this investigation were also outlined in this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Context for the Study

In order to fully appreciate how leadership-as-practice unfolded for the rural school engaged in a school improvement project, an understanding of the context within which this improvement initiative unfolded is key. To this end, I utilized the empirical data collected, namely interviews with participants and my notes from the documents analyzed, to share my interpretation of the context of this study.

The first section of Chapter Four provides an overview of the background of the school in which the study was undertaken, including a description of the demographic profile of the school. To provide a nuanced understanding of the context I first share my observations of my first day at the school. The second section outlines the elements of the initiative and how the initiative was implemented by the participants. Finally, the challenges experienced by the participants as they implemented the initiative are described in order to paint a complete picture of how participants characterized the unfolding of their collaborative efforts on the project.

The Douglas School

The site of the study was a rural school in Saskatchewan that has been in operation for over 40 years. This school is one of 40 schools in the Riversdale School Division. The K-12 school has a teaching staff of 10 teachers, three of whom are employed half time, and a student population of 118 students. The focus of this study was the elementary section, where the improvement initiative was being implemented. Six teachers worked with the elementary students, with one teacher employed half time, and another teacher teaching physical education. With a student population of 72 students, the elementary section is divided into four multi-grade

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homerooms, namely Grades 1 to 2, Grades 3 to 4, Grades 5 to 6 and the Grades 7-9, with teachers being assigned to each class. Dahlia and Tamika were the teachers for the 7, 8, 9 home room, Shawna the 5 to 6 home room, Carla the 3 to 4 home room and Stacy the 1 to 2 home that included the kindergarten students who attend school on alternate days.

First Impressions of Douglas School

The following section is written from my perspective as a researcher trying to establish a sense of the local rural context, the school environment, and the people with whom I would be working for the remainder of the semester. The section is written in the first person present tense in order to capture my thoughts, reflections, and biases as a researcher coming into this context for the first time.

Today is my first day out in the field. I do not know what to expect. As I travel, many thoughts cross my mind as I marvel at the fields interspersed with towns along the highway. I wonder how receptive the teachers will be, exactly what I will find out, whether or not this site will be a good fit with my research interests, and what I will do if it isn't. I am jolted out of my thoughts by the sound of the GPS telling me to turn. Soon I see signs that announce the services that are offered in the town of Douglas that are similar to many found in rural Saskatchewan communities, including a hotel, a gas bar and a Co-op.

As I turn off the highway, the homes that line the streets are nestled in groves of large trees, evidencing signs of a well-kept, scenic community. Under the guidance of the GPS I take the left turn. As I roll to a stop at the intersection, the fire hydrant decked out with a white face and a smile catches my eye. Standing behind the hydrant is the school. I wonder if the students painted the fire hydrant with that smiley face.

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I pull into the parking space, taking note of the school bus at the side of the building. Across the road from the entrance of the school there are several homes, a business, and a modern two-storey building that dwarfs the K to 12 school. As I enter the school, I pass a monument that houses an old school bell. The plaques on the monument chronicle the history of the school, listing the names of trustees who served during the dates of the school's grand opening. The monument is nestled in the midst of several huge trees that are older than the bell housed on the concrete structure. I walk into the boot room, which leads to the entrance of the school. On the door is a sign that warmly welcomes parents and children into the school family. I think to myself that this is a lovely way to create a sense of inclusion for all.

To the right of the entrance is the school office. An elderly lady greets me with a smile, calling me by name. "This is a good sign, she is expecting me," I think to myself. I respond, "Yes, it is nice to see you again. I am here to see your principal, and this time with an appointment". We both laugh at my comment that references my first encounter with the school administrative assistant. On that day I had called the school a few minutes before my arrival while I was in the neighborhood for another appointment. I had wanted to introduce myself to the principal, Denise, and schedule a meeting to discuss my project. I recalled the secretary's warm voice as she told me that if I could get there in thirty minutes, I would be able to get about five minutes with the principal. I remember how protective Denise was of her teachers' time and interest. She had made it clear that day that she did not want to unnecessarily distract them if I was not seriously invested in working with them on this study.

While I wait for Denise to finish up a meeting, I engage in pleasant conversation with the school administrative assistant. The meeting is soon over, and Denise invites me on a tour of the school. Along the way she introduces me to staff members and deals with questions and

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concerns in the moment. Denise shows me all the class rooms in the school. I am introduced to a number of teachers, some who might be involved in the research project because of their role in the initiative, and others who would not. As I walk along the hallways of the school with Denise I notice that the walls are lined with photos and art work of the families and children represented in the school. I notice recurring names and that most of the children have additional family members in the school. I think to myself, “This is a school that has served generations of families”. On the wall across from these pictures are momentos of celebrated athletes and historic achievements from the time of the school’s inception. These photos are historically significant for the school, demonstrating a history of success.

We continue our tour to the elementary section of the school, where I once again notice the decorated walls. The walls along the elementary corridor of the school are decked out with art work and student posters that focus on each student’s preferred learning style. Across from these posters is a photo montage that captures all the graduating classes of the school. On close examination of the names I can once again see recurring surnames that float across the decades.

As we continue on the tour, Denise shows me the “Collaboration Room” which is the space where teachers gather together when they are not teaching. She explains that with the introduction of the initiative, teachers no longer have individual classroom space. They all are situated in the “Collaboration Room” and move to classrooms to facilitate classes.

We stop by the middle years room, where the grades 6 to 9 students are working on ELA. There I meet Tamika and Dahlia who both welcome me to the school. Students are working in different spaces across the room, some with tablets, and others with books. They all seem to be working on different tasks. There are signs on the wall that provide students with strategies to

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use when they are having difficulty with their work. One sign says, “I don’t get it” (with a red stamp across those words), while the text below reads, “this is what we say instead: ‘I tried.... and’ ... ‘I still have a question about’...’could you please help me get started.’”

We move on to the Grades 3 to 6 learning space where the Grades 1 to 5 students are working on Math. I am introduced to Shawna and Carla who co-teach the elementary math curriculum. Denise checks in with a few students, asking them about what they are working. I watch as the students explain their efforts and what they are going to do once they are finished. I think to myself, “These kids are really self-sufficient”. I also notice two students to my left who are busy quizzing each other on math facts. Others are using electronic devices, while some are filling out worksheets. There are posters on the walls in this classroom providing students with information about seating options, reminders to stay on top of their work, and other self-regulation reminders. We then move on to the Kindergarten and Grades 1 and 2 section where I am introduced to Stacy who is busy working with Kindergarten students.

Each of the teachers I met are receptive to me, and ask me general questions about my work. Denise let them know that I would talk more about the research project during the staff meeting with the elementary teachers after school. As we complete the tour of the school, Denise explains that she still taught (or in her words, supervised) classes because she wanted to stay connected with the students. She invites me to attend her first session, and I happily accompany her to the class. While there I notice that the classroom walls have the same kinds of self-regulating and motivational messaging that I saw in the elementary classrooms. I ask Denise about the consistent signage. She explains that because the school moved to a collaborative learning space model where teachers do not “own” the classrooms any longer, teachers wanted to ensure that the messaging is similarly reinforced throughout the school. Denise moves around the

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classroom, checking in with the students to see what modules of distance learning each of them is working on. She explains that her role is to serve as a resource for the students as they complete their distance learning tasks.

After observing the class work for a while, I move to the Collaboration Room where a desk has been provided for me. I notice that the Collaboration Room includes several workstations from which the teachers work. The room also has shelves and tables that are filled with resources. Teachers wander in and out of the room, collecting items as needed and chatting with each other about what is going on in their classes. One teacher is situated in the room putting together a handout that she is going to use in her class, while another teacher is working on her computer. On the surface at least, teachers seem to be comfortable with the collective structure of their workspace that appears to provide them with more opportunities to think and converse with each other as they work. One of the teacher candidates walks into the room and starts describing a gap she has noticed in the initiative I hope to research. As the other teachers in the room start to add to the conversation, confirming the gap and offering ways to address it, I think to myself, “This is what collaboration looks like. They all pitch in readily to provide a solution to a problem”. Leadership-as-practice is happening in the moment, and I become more excited to be part of the innovations going on in the school.

At the end of the day the teachers and Denise gather at the elementary door to help students with their bags and boots before they shuffle outside to catch the bus. As the bus rolls away, the teachers wave to the students to send them off. With the prompting of Denise, the teachers make their way to the Lunch/Meeting room for our meeting.

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As I enter the room, I notice the school outcomes chart (Appendix G) looming large on the wall behind the teachers. This chart captures all of the projects with timelines that the teachers will work on for the year. As they settle down, teachers discuss the events of the day. Denise introduces me to the group once again and asks me to provide information related to my project given my desire for them to consent to be participants. Fortunately, all teachers indicate their interest and sign the consent form. As I leave the school that day, I reflect on the context of the community, its generational influence on the culture of the school environment, and on the nature of the participants who appear to be well-situated as a collaborative team to support my study. I also recognize that this school encapsulates the finding in the literature review that rural schools are “innovative out of necessity”. The team seems pre-disposed towards changing teaching practice in order to improve student learning. Those positive attributes will no doubt impact the findings of the study, but also create an exciting context within which to study leadership as practice.

The Douglas Culture: Community, Trust, and Innovation

This section offers a sense of the community history of the school, the sense of trust placed in school members to provide quality education, and the innovative spirit of staff members from the perspective of participants in the study.

Culture of trust. The Douglas school is situated in a close-knit community that is vested in the success of the school. A number of staff members of the school are long standing members of the community who, along with their family members, attended the school themselves and/or have children currently attending the school. Many of the teachers and staff members are former students. The school’s superintendent served as a teacher and then principal for the school for several years, and also has children currently attending the school. In commenting on the

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connection of the community with the school, the superintendent explained that the Douglas community is made up of a very stable set of two-parent families. Many are former students who have returned to the community to raise their family in a small town. The generational influence on the school community is palpable:

If you look at our parent base around here the majority are two parent-families. We have actually a relatively high number of families where one parent is at home still. That is not that common anymore, but yet I think there is a relative high proportion of that in this community, so that stability goes a long way. You know, we have an awful lot of former students that are moving back to the community to raise their kids here. So, I think that alone tells you what their thought about the school and the community is. They want to raise them in a small town, in this particular small town, so I think that's pretty important.

– **Paul**

This connection between the school and community has engendered a high level of trust on the part of the parents as it relates to the implementation of the initiative. As Dahlia and Tamika explained, the parents know the teachers from the community and they trust that the school has the best interest of their children at heart:

I really believe pretty strongly that the reason the community and the parents have always worked so well and so in sync is because of that piece of trust between the community, the parents and those of us who have been here for a while. And anyone new that comes in gets absorbed and then gets welcomed as well and that's just kind of how it has always gone... I think the size of us helps a bit, but I think that long standing atmosphere of trust and the school knows what they are doing just let them do their thing. – **Dahlia**

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So I think the relationship and the fact that those parents help because they are willing to let us try even if some of them are fully on board and some are not, but for the most part they are willing to let us try because they know us and they know that we wouldn't do something that we thought was bad for their kids. – **Tamika**

These factors have emboldened the teachers as they worked towards the successful implementation of the project. They know the parents, and by extension, recognize that the community is comfortable with what the school is doing. Parents trust that the children are provided with a quality education and are taught by caring and committed educators.

Shawna and Stacy also pointed out that the small size of the rural school has enabled the successful implementation of the project as it allows the teachers and students to connect as they work together:

I think because we are a smaller staff we are all connected, there is multi-grades happening, the mentorships happening between the kids because they all know each other, they all, half of them are relatives and cousins, that's a small part of it too...I don't know, just the small closeness. There is about 8 or 10 of us in total, which that's not a lot, right, which makes I guess a closer team. – **Shawna**

I think one of things we have going for us is the small numbers. So, to get this started I really like the small numbers... we know our students very well. We get to know each of them personally. Their families and their background and that is sure helpful and just the small size of classes, make it pretty easy to do the project based and give the students the help that they need, as they are learning the skills to be independent. The family atmosphere, everybody working together. - **Stacy**

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The small size of the team, its closeness and the family atmosphere based on connections to the rural community are key elements of the context within which the improvement project unfolded, contributing to the ways in which the team worked together.

Culture of innovation. In the face of declining enrollment and staff reductions in the early 2000's, the division and the school responded with an initiative to undertake distance learning. Although the initiative could have been fraught with resistance, Paul, a superintendent, explained that historically the school was open to innovation, particularly after its brush with possible closure in the mid-2000's:

[The school] does have a long history of a solid staff and a good school situation. It also has a history of being innovative and risk-takers and that has kind of been the hallmark of this place for a long time....We had a good trusting staff that could have open dialogue at staff meeting and talk about pretty much anything I think and that enabled us to be willing to try new things and to give them a fair shot. So, that was there early on, I would say when it came to the online learning...that was a massive undertaking and honestly, basically an opportunity that presented itself to develop a proposal for it and we did that as a staff. And I was able to walk in to our staff and say we have this opportunity it's going to involve a bunch of work up-front but, this is the possible rewards for our school, and our staff and for our kids and I didn't have one naysayer. They were all on board... So, to be honest that was just the culture right, that you can talk about anything and people are willing to try it and give it a shot without rushing to judgement on them so, I think that has always been the norm here. – **Paul**

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Paul further explained that on his first day at the school when he started as a teacher he was approached by a veteran teacher who described the culture of the school and what he was expected to do as a new member of staff. He pointed out that there is an ingrained culture of trying new things that is sustained in the school by the veteran teaching staff as a collective, and is not held in the purview of a single principal leader:

I think there has been a long-ingrained culture in the school around that, and so because it has had stable staffing over the years, that staffing has always carried that philosophy forward, I think. That has been key. There has been turn-over but there hasn't been that massive turn-over and so I think those ingrained practices and philosophy carried through. There has been a lot of principals that have gone through here. In the last 20 years there would have been at least 8, that's a lot a leadership change in a small school. Not for bad reasons, but at the same time there has been a very veteran teaching staff here that has stayed, and a veteran supporting staff that has stayed long term and I think they have been the backbone of that culture carrying forward... Our veteran staff have always carried that message forward and I think that has been critical. If it was always the principal carrying that message forward that would be tougher because it's top-down. You know the principal was certainly on board with that philosophy, but I think the veterans reinforcing it carried a lot of weight. – **Paul**

These findings suggest that school members are highly invested in their teaching and learning efforts because they feel a sense of responsibility to the families in the community where a number of the participants grew up. Some have faced the brush with rural school closure, and as a result, understand how important it is to work collaboratively and innovatively in order to be

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sustainable. The collective sense of vision therefore does not necessitate that leadership be viewed as a property invested in a single leader, particularly since formal leaders have changed more often than many of the staff. The consequences of stability and change, pressure and possibility have fostered an innovative spirit of collaboration in which doing things differently, together, has become a collaborative leadership norm.

Impetus for Change: Riversdale School Division Learning Philosophy

In keeping with its thrust to empower students to succeed in a 21st century workforce, Riversdale School Division implemented a vision for learning aligned with 21st century learning ideals enacted through a personalized electronically blended learning model.

Dubbed the 7C's, the 21st century skills emphasized are creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, character, cultural and ethical citizenship and computer and digital technologies. The personalized electronically blended learning model is a learner centered process that gradually enables students to self-direct much of their own learning while teachers support and create personalized programs for student achievement of learning outcomes. In order to create opportunities and build on the collective understanding and use of the learning philosophy across division school, Riversdale School Division intentionally emphasized four factors:

Readiness Assessments - the on-going self- evaluation of strengths, opportunities and challenges as learners, schools and institutions.

Culture Building - creating the open and accommodating organizational spaces and relationships required to embrace and facilitate change.

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Character Building - refining the traits, habits and standards of learners to ensure they become 21st century leaders.

Skills & Knowledge Building - through daily classroom practices, growing both the skills and knowledge base that will serve learners in all aspects of life.

Keisha, the Division's Project Supervisor, explained that these factors formed the building blocks for the transfer of responsibility required for the students to become 21st century citizens:

We have three major pillars I guess you could say all being built at different times, and at different paces, ultimately using readiness assessments about who you are as a person as a learner and your academic readiness that drives your learning moving forward. So we use that analysis then we build culture, character and skills and knowledge...That is the philosophy around it and as we move into a 'you do' situation where the students ultimately have voice and choice in their learning there is a gradual move towards that. ... for us what we are always looking at in Riversdale, is are our students understanding what they are learning, why they are learning it, looking at outcomes, being a part of the planning process or driving the planning process of their learning. – Keisha

In order to enact the learning philosophy, Riversdale School Division also created an implementation framework for building a culture that would foster attainment of this vision and its goals. The REORDER implementation framework is represented in figure 4.1.

R	RELATIONSHIPS: We are all Mentors
E	ENVIRONMENT: We provide flexible learning environments
O	OPPORTUNITIES: We provide voice and choice
R	RESOURCES: We access people, knowledge, technology and our skills
D	DISTRIBUTION OF LEADERSHIP: We are learners that lead
E	EVALUATION: We set goals and measure growth
R	RECOGNITION: We honor growth in who we are and what we learn

Figure 4.1 Graphical representation of the REORDER Implementation Framework

The acronym “REORDER” relates to strategic priority areas that support implementation. These areas include: i) [R]elationships which speak to the need for staff members to maintain mentoring relationships to support each other and the students, as well as cultivating mentoring relationships among the students; ii) [E]nvironments that addresses the flexibility that is offered in the learning environment; iii) [O]pportunities for voice and choice provided to students as they learn, which is an essential element of the personalized learning space; iv) [R]esources, including access to people, knowledge, technology and skills; v) [D]istribution of leadership focused on continuous learning engaged in by leadership teams, teachers and students; vi) [E]valuation based on continuous measurement and evaluation of each project, and; vii) [R]ecognition of moments of growth.

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Each school in the Riversdale School Division is called to implement the REORDER framework in order to achieve the 21st Century learning philosophy through a personalized electronically blended model, though schools have autonomy to create local innovations that suit their unique contexts. As Keisha, the Project Supervisor of the Division's learning philosophy, noted, "what they are doing is implementing a philosophy in a way that makes sense for them. It is going to look different in all our buildings, some doing project based, multi-grade, multi-subjects". To that end, this study focused on how leadership-as-practicewas enacted in Douglas School's local initiative focused on the implementation of student self-regulation in project learning at the elementary level.

The Douglas School Improvement Initiative

In 2018, the Douglas school engaged in a strategic initiative to further bring the personalized and blended learning philosophy to life at the school with the aim of improving learning opportunities for students. Students would be organized into groups for the achievement of learning outcomes in Math and ELA, after which they would engage in self-directed learning for a portion of the day, and in project learning based on curricular outcomes across multiple subject areas. Homeroom time was maintained with teachers assigned to check communication for 10 minutes at the beginning and the end of each day. At the end of the day, teachers were provided with collaboration/reflection time to consider each day's progression. Figure 4.2 provides an outline of the school schedule.



AM Home Room Check In	
Math & ELA 	K-9 split into 2 groups Explicit teaching of skills
Recess	All K-9
Phys Ed 	K-9 split into 3 groups Goal setting & planning Time management
Student Directed Learning	
Recess	All K-9
Project Time	Project-based learning that explores curricular outcomes from multiple subject areas
PM Home Room Check In	

Figure 4.2. New Schedule

ELA/MATH time. In the new schedule the first block of the day entailed the Grades 1 to 9 cohort being split in two, with half of the students (Grades 1 to 5) engaged in ELA in the first hour of the day, while the Grades 6 to 9 were engaged in Math. In the second hour the ELA and Math teams switched groups. The ELA team used the Daily 5 strategy to meet most of the curriculum outcomes.

Student/Self-directed learning/Physical Education. The second component of the day was student/self-directed time, which alternated with Physical Education. All the students had 30 minutes of physical education every day. For student/self-directed (SDT) time the students were broken into three groups: Grade 1 to 3, Grades 7 to 9 and Grades 4 to 6. During this time, students supervised by teachers worked on achieving learning goals they set for themselves from ELA or Math from the morning or Project work for the afternoon. During a meeting to assess

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how self-directed (SDT) time was working, Shawna shared with the team an explanation provided by a student as to how this period of the day should work:

Mary actually explained it really well. She said Sandy was sitting right beside him and he said “well if I am struggling with Math I need to work on just Math or work on Math and improve that because I am behind in it whereas maybe Sandy is doing better at Math but she is struggling in ELA so we don’t all have to do the same things” so she kind of identified that. “It helps us to not get too far behind, we are getting extra time to work on the things we need”. One said that “it helps me to think about how like my time and the amount I can get done in one self-directed time, and I go home and do homework for three hours” and they said “it’s amazing that I can get the same amount done in the self-directed time that I did at home. - **Shawna**

Project time. In the afternoon, students worked on projects that combined topic skills and concepts. Instead of teaching subjects as discrete disciplinary topics, project time was used to explore curricular outcomes from Science, Social Studies, Health, Arts Education and Practical and Applied Arts. Some Math and ELA outcomes were also incorporated in these projects.

In fact, Dahlia and Shawna explained that the project-based learning element was not a new initiative for the school. However, the school improvement initiative brought together all the teachers and the pockets of project-based learning, and placed more emphasis on the gamut of curricula across all grade levels:

Project-based learning has been going on for a while. I think this year is the year we just put it all together. That is what I think. This is the year it has been consistent”. - Dahlia

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Lots of us were already doing it in our classrooms, just with our own groups, we are doing projects continuously, doing projects. It just looks a little different and really applying it in a different way. - **Shawna**

The design of the program resulted in several structural changes in the way the school day operated. These changes impacted the scheduling of classes, the way in which classes were instructed (with emphasis placed on students setting, prioritizing and meeting their learning goals) and the location of teachers in the building. Classrooms were redesigned to facilitate flexible learning with several seating options. Rather than traditional desks and chairs, classrooms were full of futons, yoga balls, and hoki stools.

Additionally, teachers were located in a Collaboration Room instead of staying in an assigned classroom for the day. They were required to rotate through the different learning spaces depending on what was happening in each time block. This change allowed students to have access to multiple teachers in each time block and provided opportunities for teachers to co-teach classes.

Establishing routines, rituals, and norms of collaboration. Teachers spent the first month of the school year preparing the students for changes by specifically teaching skills that the students would need for the rest of the year, namely, grit and growth mindset, self-regulation, empathy and kindness. This month was also used to establish routines, getting the students used to the new schedule and preparing them to utilize self-directed time (SDT). Stacy explained the importance of teaching these skills that were not all new, but that needed to continually be reinforced:

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We have, we did work last year and the year before on character traits, building character traits and introducing students to all the different character traits and then working on those a little bit each month. Then we chose the three for this year...Kindness, self-regulation, grit and growth mindset. So, that's kind of our big push. Last year was ok in introducing them but I don't think they had a chance to really understand. - **Stacy**

To get the students ready for project-based learning, passion projects were incorporated during project time for the first month of the school year. With the guidance of the teachers, students were asked to select and work on a project for which they had a passion. These passion projects were used to model how project time would work for the students, and show them how to achieve their learning outcomes in Science, Social Studies, Health, Arts Education, and Practical and Applied Arts.

As a means of establishing a culture of care, teachers continued to maintain a tradition where they waved to the students as they boarded the bus home at the end of the school day. Dahlia explained that waving to the busses was a tradition that started with the first principal of the school:

It's just always been that way. I have never been in this building when we haven't done that for a while and even still now the high school teachers will sometimes stay in the corner hallway and I like that too because they are catching some of those town kids going out and regardless we just want to send everybody out and his message was that we want to send everybody out knowing that they were cared about when they were here and they are going to be cared about when they come back... So it is a really good feeling and gives a good message to the kids like we are not getting rid of you we are not hiding from

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you. We still want to see you off and make sure that you are ok. I am glad that people are still doing it and buying into it. - **Dahlia**

Though waving to the busses was a tried and true tradition, it now became a regular norm of behavior that signalled time for teacher collaboration that was added to their schedule for the new school year. One teacher explained that it is a time for the teachers to “get on the same page”. Tamika and Stacy further explained that collaboration time at the end of school was not new, but meeting in the Collaboration Room was different than what had occurred in the past. Tamika added that the collaboration time at the end of school day was a fluid time of group reflection, where the team collectively reviewed the day in preparation for their next day or to collectively problem solve an issue that may have arisen during the day:

It’s kind of just fluid. It just happens so normally because we are just there waving at the end of the day. We just kind of talk. Well someone will have something that they want to share either a funny moment or a frustration that they want to go over or just how project time went because that would be what we all had just come from. It could be anything that we end up talking about, and eventually we just slowly start moving towards the Collaboration Room, sometimes not for a while, sometimes pretty quickly. But it’s been like that meeting pow wow at the end of the day that we have forever because we all go wave to the buses. It’s just what we have always done. That’s not new but it’s more that we are moving to the same place is new. What I have often found is that by the time we head back into the Collaboration Room we are ready at a point to either break off into smaller groups or to break off on our own to get our own stuff done for the next day or for finishing out the day. Sometimes it’s just to see if we have all noticed the same things in certain kids. Sometimes it’s for one of us saying you know we need to call a parent we

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kind of just talk about it with the other staff. What should we sa?y Have you guys noticed it? So we have the information before we go make that call. Sometimes it is just to have that idea that we are all in the same boat in the same situation trying to make it through and figure it out. So offering each other advice and sometimes listening ears like saying like yup that kid acted that way for me today too. Oh my goodness I am not the only one. So it could be anything like that. And we often notice the same things with the kids. One kid had an off day. He had an off day for everyone. - **Tamika**

Stacy further explained that the collaboration time was particularly important because of the changes that were made through the project:

I think we have always done it. We just didn't know it was called collaboration time. We have always waved at the busses. For the nine years I have been here we have waved at busses and we always just kind of talk about our day. You know, the funnies or, the hey we need to check in with this mom or check in with this kid or, have you noticed? We have always done that. I think it's a good way to all stay on the same page. This year it's super important because the kids have so many teachers and I think it's just important to really chat about that and to make sure we are doing what's best for the kids so they are not falling through the cracks. - **Stacy**

The maintenance of the ritual of waving to the buses, the addition of a set time for collaboration along with the establishment of the routines prior to the start of the project were mechanisms that enabled the teachers to stay on track or connected with each other while helping the students to navigate the changes brought on by the project.

Primary benefit: Personalized learning. In order to ensure that the school community was aware of the initiative, school community members were sent a flyer that addressed changes in practice along with the benefits to students. The benefits to students were described as: opportunities to learn according to one's learning style; access to educators in their areas of passion; stronger connections to real world learning; collaborative multi-age learning environments, and; the inclusion of daily engagement in physical activity. In describing the initiative, participants lauded the project primarily for allowing students to learn at their own pace. Carla explained that the initiative allowed all students to move on in their learning when they were ready to do so:

How I see it especially because I do most of the Math, kids are not being pushed ahead of where they are ready. In the past I feel like okay you are in grade 5 so you have to do this, this, and this. Ok now you are in grade 6 you have to do this, and they might just not be ready. So that's kind of the one part that I like about it is, if they are just not quite there yet then we try to fill that gap and then push forward. So kids can kind of be where they need to be because you have those strong ones that are sitting there bored, well that's not the case anymore because they are just flying on. And the ones that need a little extra help we are able to work with them. That is a really good part of this. - **Carla**

Dahlia further explained that the needs of all the students are being met through the personalization of their learning:

if we can kind of key in and personalize every student's learning and where they are at then we can target things that they are weak at and attack them earlier and specifically rather than continuing to shuffle them along and teach them as every other child in that

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grade and in terms of the ones that are beyond that we are not holding them back we are giving them an opportunity to keep moving forward and challenge themselves, find out where they land rather than thinking of them in boxes of grades. That's sort of been my understanding of why we are doing it.- **Dahlia**

The teachers welcomed the opportunity to continue meeting students where they are at and assisting them to take ownership of their learning.

Addressing challenges: Teamwork and collaboration. As they worked together to implement the project, the teaching team met regularly, formally and informally. In their formal meetings there was a pattern of reviewing what was happening to come up with solutions to address challenges. Some of the most concerning challenges for the team included: (a) figuring out how to work together to teach the students (especially in Math and ELA); (b) a sense of lost autonomy brought on by the increase in collaboration and the restructuring of the learning space that resulted in teachers no longer having their own classrooms; (c) perceptions of increased workload as teachers had to prepare for the changes in the way they now were required to work, and; (d) concerns about students who could not self-regulate.

Denise pointed out that for her, the team work started at least six months before the project started, on a day when the teachers came in on a Sunday to draft the outcomes map of learning outcomes for all subjects from Kindergarten to Grade 9. She added that once the outcome map was created across the curricular and grades, teachers started picking the outcomes that they wanted to teach. She explained that in this interaction she saw the team coming together:

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So, then all these teachers started picking outcomes and for the most part it worked out. There were some left over at the end where people were like “ahhh I don’t know where that will fit” so we kind of divided them out, but it took us a whole day. I brought in lunch I brought in snacks I had candles going like I tried to make it as nice as possible. You know it’s a Sunday and then into the night that night emails were happening – “I feel like you took more outcomes than me, so I will take one from you, or I was thinking about this and I figured out a way to bring this outcome within my project so I can take this one” - so they were, I don’t want to say fighting, but they were trading to help each other out. So the teamwork started to happen right there... because they started to take care of each other, right off the bat. The fact that they all came in, the fact that they did the pre-work to plan their project and the fact that they have not given up on each other since. It started that day.

- Denise

In addition to preparing for the implementation of the initiative, teachers had to work together to organize co-teaching opportunities as well as find ways to coordinate self-directed time. Instead of being able to retreat to their own classroom space, they had to work together to find ways to carry responsibility for all the students during ELA, MATH and self-directed time:

We are learning how to be productive in a co-teaching environment. And I think a big thing that we are going to have to come back to again over and over is that collective responsibility together as a team. And we talked about it and said we have teams within our co-teaching so Math has a team, ELA has a team but then we are on team all together. So when you are making decisions you have to think about, ‘is this going to influence our whole team or is this going to influence our Math team how are we going to come to the decision?’ – **Shawna**

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This dependence on each other added an additional level of stress to the team as some of the teachers felt as if they had to do more to be ready for their classes. As Tamika explained:

The hard part is feeling like we are all counting on one another so we are letting down more than just ourselves when we don't get something done. And so it is like we are doing more than we were used to doing even for ourselves because we are being more explicit or we are having to share more information or we are creating more. Whereas before I knew what I was doing so I didn't have to write it all down. – **Tamika**

Denise explained that teachers put themselves under this undue pressure because they were now more dependent on each other:

And part of it is they are just such strong educators and part of it is they feel like they are letting down the team if they don't get it done. One of them said to me, "it was different in my own class. If didn't get the thing done that, I wanted to I was able to wing it and nobody knew but now there is a pressure". Which is a positive pressure, but they were taking it in a negative way.- **Denise**

Tamika further explained that the pressure was compounded by teachers trying to navigate how to deal with and respond to each other as they worked on the project:

I think that has been one of the biggest learning curves for all of us. Yes we all knew each other and know each other but it is very different when we are really fully counting on another in the same teaching environment and figuring out how to approach each other with teaching things. Because we are all teaching in a different way than what we are used to and yet we still want to be respectful of one another and don't want to upset one another. If we think one person thinks a certain way or really likes the way something is

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happening the other people don't like it that way. We have had to find ways to communicate and not take offense and actually work through those things. So that's been ne., I think that has been the biggest change in terms of having to really count on each other in a totally different way than we were before. – **Tamika**

Denise sought additional support from the school division, in response to the pressure that teachers felt from the additional tasks required to implement the project in the first term. To help the teachers deal with this pressure, the learning philosophy supervisor met with the teachers to help them reflect on their challenges and to collectively problem solve. At the end of the session it was decided that the teachers would get more support in the form of Dahlia coming on full-time in the first term to assist the teachers with completing additional tasks that needed to be done in preparation for their classes. Despite the challenges of learning how to work together in a new way, and the additional workload, the teachers appeared to have bonded as they worked toward the common cause of successfully implementing the project. Dahlia explained that working collaboratively was a stretch for her, but she has never seen the team so united in a long time:

At first it was really terrifying because I am very plan oriente., I need to have a plan and I have never in 20 years taught any other way. I was always in charge of me. So, I found it a bit challenging., If I don't feel like I am ahead of the game or at least on top of the game then I am going to let down at least three other adults and maybe a room full of kids. But yet I can't get too far ahead of the game because I am not the only one in charge of it. So, I have to make sure that I am always being collaborative too. So it's been challenging for sur., When I used to pick up working, half time used to be easy because I would leave everything that I was doing and then the next time I came I just picked up what I was

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doin., Whereas now I spend most of my evening at home sorting through whatever gets emailed to me from the teachers who were teaching that day, catching me up on where left off and what I need to be doing. So, it definitely has been a lot more work because I am always having to collaborate on that day that I am not here to try and catch up. But it's still great. It has just been a change a big shift...Like as a staff k -12 it's been a long time since I have seen us so united, maybe because we are small, maybe because we are on the journey together, but even our high school teachers I really get a sense of empathy from them. They understand that we have taken on something heavy and rather than feeling like they are left out of it they are just wanting to support it and it hasn't always been that way....I feel like everybody understands that everybody is kind of pulling together for whatever it is that we are doing together.-**Dahlia**

Karen explained that things were a bit different at the school as they were working more closely as a team, especially because they are now in the Collaboration Room:

The main difference this year is the collaboration. I think that before we have been told that we had to do things and this is how it is whether you like it or not, whether you are on board or you're not, this is what we're doing. I think this initiative was approached differently. I don't know necessarily if we had a choice but it felt like, it felt more friendly, than previous times, but uhhh to me just because it felt nice it felt more friendly – it was easier to be on board with it, I guess. And also we know that education is different and this is something I wholeheartedly believe in, in a new way to teach kids and this was easy for me, to understand that what they are trying to do it's the right thing to do I guess. – **Karen**

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Lisa also explained that the teachers have had to collaborate more because of the change in the structure of the schedule:

Yeah they're definitely working more as a team just because they're not just worried about what they're teaching individually in their own classroom they're having to collaborate with each other on projects and co-planning whether it's math and ELA depending on which subject they're teaching in the morning. So I see a lot more teamwork and collaboration between them all. And you know just that working in the work room alone you know you just hear a lot more visiting and chatting and becoming I think a closer knit staff than if everybody's just in their own classroom every morning and after school working on their own. – **Lisa**

The teachers in one of their planning meetings also expressed appreciation for the increased collaboration afforded them through the project as they worked through changes in the Collaboration Room:

Dahlia: One more thing for the positives before you switch, I like the Collaboration Room a lot. Granted I have been living in the little hole in the home ec. room for a long time. But I love that when we come in there and we bring something up its like oh yeah I saw ...now we have this behaviour tracking report, we have already gotten on top of a kid before he destroyed soccer for everyone so its handled right...

Tamika: So that could be it's the consistent messaging from us to parents

Denise: Yes we are being very strong in terms of getting...

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Tamika: And Shawna even said it one day she said I am so happy its not just me

Dahlia: Yeah like nobody is alone anymore

Carla: When you here oh we are having the same thing then you go ok it just wasn't just me having that issue everybody you know

Dahlia: I feel it's solution based it went from you and I just banging our head off the wall on the topic whereas its ok this happened let's get the tracking thing going let's get that kid call in his mom it's like it is being handled so I think that's a real big positive we are really standing as a unit in front and they know that.

Another challenge was the student's response to the change in the structure. The teachers found that several of the students were not successfully self-regulating and/or personalizing their learning. Teachers strategized several ways to address these challenges, which included implementing assigned seating for those students who were not selecting appropriate spots. The ELA team also made further adjustments that allowed students who were personalizing to continue doing so while providing extra supports for those who needed more help. As they adjusted the initiative on the go, teachers celebrated the gains made in their team meetings or through email. Figure 4.3 captures an email that was sent to the ELA team after they had discussed and implemented changes that would assist the students to take charge of their learning (personalize) in ELA.

“Subject: We did it!

Well it took some blood sweat and tearsok no blood that I know of... but we had 3 classrooms of hard-working focused ELA 1-5s today. I stopped before each round with the teacher-directed room, called their names “what round are you on”. All could answer me and all did it. The personalized side ROCKED it!!! We allowed no learning on the futon yet....until they earn those comfy spots back. Intense Learning happened today, and it was so quiet I blew my nose and apologized for how loud I was! I can share more stories in person (not nose blowing). Its time to breathe some relief ladies. Please note that Jack Courtney and Bobby all chose to work apart from each other #win! I was so proud of them that we shut down at Grade 1-2 snack time and played Kahoot. I finally feel like I’m on the right side of the score!!!!

Figure 4.3. We did it! – Dahlia’s Email

From this email we can see that Dahlia was relieved that the strategies that were employed helped the students to self-regulate and personalize their learning and gave her a sense of accomplishment which she shared with her colleagues in her email.

Summary

This chapter painted a picture of the context within which the project unfolded. I provided an overview of the project, the processes in which the team at Douglas School engaged to implement the project, and some of the challenges experienced by the team that were the basis of much reflection and collaborative problem-solving. As the team engaged in the day to day implementation of the project, they were together to solve emerging challenges. It was in those collaborative processes that leadership-as-practicewas evidenced. With this in mind the

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following chapter explores how leadership-as-practice was enacted while the project was being implemented.

CHAPTER FIVE

Exploring Leadership

This study aimed to explore how leadership-as-practice was enacted during the implementation of a rural school improvement initiative. Several data sources were triangulated to first to get a clear picture of the context within which the project unfolded and secondly to unearth the tacit taken for granted behaviours and actions (what they do and say) of participants as they engage in leadership work. In Chapter Four the contextual elements of this study were shared. This contextual information provided the foundation for understanding the findings elicited from the discussions in project meetings. In this chapter, I provide an outline of the findings of the study as they relate to how leadership-as-practice was enacted during these meetings. The analysis was guided by Raelin's (2016) eight activities of the practice of leadership.

Activities of leadership

Five initiative meetings were observed to determine evidence of the activities of leadership advanced by Raelin (2016), namely designing, reflecting, scanning, stabilizing, unleashing, inviting, weaving and mobilizing. All eight activities were identified with some activities occurring more frequently than others within the five meetings observed.

Designing. The designing activity speaks to the action of the team as they discussed options for a course of action to advance the project and then proceeded to assign responsibilities for the execution of the tasks that were decided on. This activity was identified in all the meetings observed except one. The designing activity seemed to emanate from the need to make decisions and complete tasks that would facilitate the smooth flow of the project or the decisions

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made to advance the project while persons tried to figure out what they should be doing. This is evidenced in the excerpt below of meeting B, where teachers discussed what steps they needed to take to adjust student self-directed time. Self-directed time is that time of day where students were expected to continue working on different learning outcomes from either ELA, Math or their projects. The students had the autonomy to choose what to work on during this time, as there was no direct instruction. Teachers were expected to be in the class to assist the students as needed. Early in the process some of the teachers expressed apprehension and uncertainty about how self-directed time would work. They were concerned with how many teachers would be in the class with the students during the self-directed period, and logistically what the teachers should be doing. The following exchange occurs as the teachers became more comfortable with self-directed time and were grappling with the need for more prep time for their classes.

Dahlia: In terms of all the teacher bodies then are we going to continue that in self-directed time or are we going to make sure that you (looking to Shawna) get your PEBL time and you (looking to Tamika) get some SST time

Denise: We are going to make sure that everybody gets some prep time

Dahlia: How are we working that? Like I said I got home at 12 o'clock when I realized that I probably could have kicked Tamika out of the room we probably didn't both have to be there

Shawna: Well why don't we just alternate then so if it's you and Tamika. One day it's Tamika, the next day it's you

Dahlia: (interjects) Take a look at the week and see who needs that time when...

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Shawna: Take it as you need it. I can use it as PEBL mentor or prep she (looking to Tamika) can use it as SST or prep

Dahlia: So just look at the week each time

Shawna: So, we have our PEBL mentor and our SST time scheduled in? (the team members nodded their head in agreement)

In this exchange Dahlia raises the point about the number of teachers in the room and shares her realization that she can do self-directed time by herself to allow Tamika to get some prep time. This conversation prompts another teacher to weigh in on a solution that could solve the problem. She suggested that teachers alternate the days on which each teacher would be assigned to self-directed time. Of note is that the way forward was negotiated by Dahlia and Shawna, with Dahlia sharing her realization of being able to manage alone with the students and Shawna drawing from that a solution that could work for the whole team. It is also important to note that Dahlia had initially been the teacher who was most uncomfortable being alone with students during self-directed time. This growing confidence and problem-solving demonstrates not only designing activities, but also the growing sense of stability as teachers became more comfortable with the initiative.

Another example of the designing activity was found during meeting E as the ELA team brainstormed the rounds (learning tasks e.g. guided reading, grammar, word work, and writing) on which students needed to work during ELA. At this point the ELA teachers had come to a major decision to rework the way students were allowed to work during the class to allow students to better engage in the personalization process. Teachers perceived that a number of the students were not self-regulating, which made it difficult for them to personalize their learning during ELA. Three of the teachers were in the meeting room, while Tamika joined the meeting

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by phone. Dahlia had compiled a document that outlined suggestions as to where students could be placed to help them self-regulate and what they could be working on (rounds) during ELA that was circulated to all teachers prior to the meeting. The discussion below picked up after the team talked about the placement of the students. Teachers needed to decide on how they would implement the changes.

Stacy: So, Tamika I think we have taken enough of your time I think that now we need to divide and conquer a little bit

Tamika: (on the telephone) Well that is what I need to know what am I dividing and conquering?

Dahlia: So, you mean in terms of content like being delivered

Tamika: Like what is it that I need to cover

Stacy: Can you do me a favour, can you figure out what Teacher times it is that we have not done the lesson for?

Tamika: Yep I have already started that I have just got to update it for the last little bit.

Stacy: Ok that would be fabulous because I don't know that there is actually anything else

[...]

Dahlia: Ok so just know your guided reading is good, your grammar is planned the word work is planned. The one day that I had that grade 4 group we just sat around with a book and made some predictions so really it would end the writing Marie is doing right now. So, you have a little time to wrap your brain around that one

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Stacy: I think you are right. So, here is my plan tomorrow Tamika if this works for you. It's you, I and Marie

Tamika: Yep

Stacy: Ok. So, if we start all together and then we split into the three areas, and Marie you let me know if you are comfortable with this too. I will take the ones and twos and those threes that need to go across to the one two room because that is where Dahlia and I will be on opposite days. So, we will start the conversation together and I will take them, and we will establish some rules over there about what it is going to look like and reminder of what their jobs are etc. If Tamika takes that 5/6 side with the kids that need to be regulated and you can have a conversation with just them about your expectations. And Marie are you comfortable then taking the 3/4 personalized side the kids that are kind of ready to roll but still having a conversation about you can earn your way back over there at any time

In these conversations team members make suggestions and provide information that assisted in arriving at a direction in which to move. Tasks and responsibilities are also negotiated, through the conversations that ensued among the team members.

Stabilizing. The stabilizing activity speaks to those actions and interactions (conversations) that provide feedback to the project resulting in an examination of the effectiveness in how the project is being implemented. This feedback allows for structural and behavioral changes as well as learning that will facilitate the successful implementation of the

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plan of action or the project being implemented. This activity was evidenced in four of the five meetings. The following excerpt from meeting A illustrates the stabilizing activity at work.

During one of their professional development day meetings one of the teacher candidates from the University of Saskatchewan questioned how to deal with students who may be taking advantage of the personalized learning. The teacher candidate felt that some students were not self-regulating in an effort to usurp her authority in the classroom. Through the discussion and the interaction with the team members the teacher candidate was provided with a procedure that she could use to address the issue. It should be noted that Denise brought to the team knowledge from her experience with the personalized learning philosophy. Prior to becoming principal of Douglas School she had facilitated personalized learning in her own classroom and also served as mentor for the personalized learning philosophy in that school and the wider school division.

Carrene: I don't know where this fits, but for kids with this whole self-regulation vs teacher regulated, what type of language do you look out for in kids if they are kind of abusing the process, well I need this like you don't want to...

Denise: Explain to me why

Carrene: ... I don't want to say that kids are being disingenuous but at the same time I feel like there are sometimes when I will get a pout when I ask someone to move or I get kind of like the angry "well you can't tell me because I need to be on this bouncy ball because it's my best learning" and I think some of the kids are starting to gain the language of to do my best learning but it is becoming more of like...

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Dahlia: (interjects) ...an excuse

Carrene: yes, this is me to do my best learning

Denise: So tell me more about that (mimicking how she would respond to the student)

Carrene: Ok

Denise: Go get your learner profile out...

Tamika: (interjects).. just say go get your learner profile and explain to me

Denise: ...and show me where all that fits in for you

Dahlia: Or just say no you're sitting right there

Denise: If you really believe that the child is being kind of sneaky about it I would say you know what for right now I don't have time to argue with you or discuss it so right now you are going to do what I want but at recess...

Dahlia and Tamika: interjects ...yes

Denise: ...you are going to get your learner profile and we will have a conversation and it would be so interesting to see how fast they change

Carrene: Ok yes

Denise: You don't want to call them out, give them the opportunity to explain but on their time...

Carrene: Yes Yes

Denise: ...absolutely give them the opportunity to share but on their time, and if it is really important to them, they will and if it's not they'll just do it your way

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- Shawna:** And a big part of that too is that's entitlement. I had issues with that with my guys last year sometimes, it is like - I am noticing that you are not self-regulating I will self-regulate for you. You are not allowed to sit on this ball
- Denise:** But then let's try again tomorrow,
- Dahlia:** Yeah
- Denise:** always the let's try again tomorrow
- Shawna:** Yes and it's like a good thing to give them the chance...
- Denise:** Because you are giving them the opportunity
- Shawna:** ...say you please self-regulate first, if they chose to not then ok

This conversation was important for all the teachers present because guiding some of the kids to self-regulate was a major challenge throughout the process. As Denise noted in one of the meetings the students had to self-regulate before they could successfully personalize their learning. Another example of the stabilizing activity was seen in the ELA group meeting where Dahlia shared her feedback on what could be done to adjust the Grades 6 to 9 ELA class. She recommended that the Grade 9 students should be pulled out and taught in an effort to keep the rest of the group on track. According to the teachers, the Grade 9 students seemed agitated by the personalization process and were not doing their best work.

- Dahlia:** That was the logic behind giving you the 6's did you take a look at what we did with 7/8s? (Referring to the document that she had sent to all the teachers prior to the meeting)
- Tamika:** Yes, I was looking

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Dahlia: I divided them more so by need because that one crew of grades 7 and 8 is just going to need an occasional check in right and the other bunch if Stacy takes them on, I think she decided she would grab them because

Stacy: Yep

Dahlia: They need some more specific planning and then if I just yank the grade nines out and ask them what they want and what they need in order to get in gear.

[...]

Dahlia: So how do you feel about that because this is kind of some fairly big revamp for them?

Tamika: I don't think it is bad because they are pulling it on right now. I think the older kids are upset that the younger kids are in there with them

Dahlia: yep and are pouting and as a result their work is suffering

Dahlia: Well if we need to teach them the way they want to be taught then I guess let's yank them out and ask them what they want then.

Stacy: But that is teaching like kindergarten

Dahlia: Exactly

Stacy: Not like grade 9

Tamika: You can tell them that, we are treating them like Kindergarten because that is how they are acting

Dahlia: That's right

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Tamika: And we have kids in Grade 8 that are handling this really well and are doing a great job

Dahlia: Yes I agree

Tamika: And they are getting chances to do the learning how they want, and the grade 9s are going to lose that because of their poor attitude

Dahlia: that sounds like our grade 5s, there must be something about the oldest

Tamika: Yeah, your right

Dahlia: Well there isn't a lot of structural change to the 6 to 9 side. I wondered about getting those roadways kids out of the hallway, though. How do you feel about them taking one of those top offices and kicking those office dwellers out.

Tamika: I am so on board with that

Stacy: (laugh) office dwellers

Dahlia: I want them out they are not doing anything in there anyway. Let those roadways one go in there and own those rooms maybe.

Tamika: They would love that

Dahlia: And then Mellisa and Otavia and Ariana have been sitting at that round one at the bottom is that too far for you to do a check in with them and if we asked Austin and Amara to start the class there so that you could have a quick meeting. Check in with them 'Do you all know what you are doing?' And then if Austin needs to work at

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the counter I suspect Amera would stay but at least then you can have that little debrief with them.

Tamika: I can live with that. I mean really it's not that far from the upper room.

Dahlia: And they seem to like that round spot and I actually don't mind it for them

Tamika: No I don't mind it either, it is a bigger space to put their stuff.

Dahlia: And then if I am going to teach the 9s. I will take them right out to the art room and then come back. I won't be gone the whole class. I will do whatever teacher time with them and then bring them back. And you can use the horse shoe table at the back for your squad of 8 7s there and the rest could sit where they are because they are working.

Stacy: Yep

In this excerpt the teachers discussed the possible changes that had been brought forward by Dahlia and Stacy in a plan that they had conceptualized as a possible response to the situation. They discussed what was happening with the Grade 9s and agreed that a move would be in the best interest of all students. Ultimately the feedback provided from the discussion and through the plan provided resulted in the teachers agreeing to make structural changes in the way they engaged the grade 9 students for ELA.

Reflecting. The reflecting activity speaks to those activities or conversations that allow team members to individually or collectively think about the meaning of their experiences in

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order to learn how to address their shared (collective) needs (Raelin, 2016). This activity could be seen in all of the meetings observed. This was evidenced in Meeting E where the teachers reflected on how they dreaded sharing with their team member, and how they felt about the ways in which things were progressing in ELA with the personalization of learning. At the end of the reflective conversation it was agreed that communication was key for the success of the project.

Dahlia: Well we would have supported you, but we were too busy freaking out (R and C laughing). We were useless to you last week.

Stacy: Ohh lord, we were all ready to have a meeting with you Friday after school – ‘but she is not here now what’

Tamika: Man

Dahlia: We were all geared up

Tamika: I am sorry

Stacy: No, no we got this. Ok so how about 6 to 9?

Tamika: Please don’t feel so scared to talk to me

Dahlia: Ok we are good now (All laughing)

Stacy: Ohh we are ridiculous.

Tamika: That is good and please like I said don’t be afraid to talk to me about anything
(Dahlia and Stacy laughs)

Stacy: We are good now we got this Tamika that is why we could do the full disclosure

Dahlia: Yeah, we went a little blue we were a little scared

Stacy: My blue side came out like nobody’s business.

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Tamika: And now my blue side is out right now thinking why were they scared to talk to me?

Stacy: This is part of what we are doing

Dahlia: It was more in terms of hurting you than afraid of you

Stacy: Yeah

Dahlia: We didn't want to offend you and we didn't want you to think we weren't on board with personalizing because we are. We were just not comfortable I guess with how things are

Stacy: So, we are personalizing, the personalization for some kids

Dahlia: And then we realized you felt the same way

Stacy: Communication.

Tamika: Ohh that's it

In this instance the teachers drew on their knowledge of their personality types to help them reflect on the reason why they did not talk to Tamika about how they were feeling about the project. Tamika also referenced her blue personality as well, as she tried to reflect on why the teachers did not come to her to share their thoughts. The use of the knowledge of their personalities seemed to have created a common and amicable ground of understanding about the value of communication on the project. Shawna, in meeting A, also makes reference to a side of her personality as she publicly reflects on the way the team has been working together on the project. The other teachers joined in support of the reflective comment.

Shawna: So, I guess my success my little blue moment, we have been through a lot this last three weeks, for all of us and I don't think we could do it with any other team

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- Dahlia:** Ahh that's true
- Denise:** I would agree
- Karen:** its true
- Dahlia:** we are a good team, even if we get grumpy sometimes
- Denise:** Yah
- Dahlia:** We are gonna get grumpy sometimes
- Denise:** We've had
- Shawna:** There is ups and downs but ...
- Denise:** There is ups and downs for sure
- Shawna:** Like when you talk to other schools no one could be doing this
because they don't have a team like us so
- Dahlia:** Ahhh
- Shawna:** So thank you guys

In the following excerpt Carrene reflected on her *aha* moment as she saw students personalize their learning. This reflection prompted the other team members to share their *aha* moments.

- Melissa:** 6 to 9 math has been a real eye opener for me, because I
think coming into it I thought - what do you mean they just do it?
What do you mean they just open up their books and start going
and then seeing it in action, it is like oh my gosh these kids can
actually open up a text book and know what they actually need to
do, and to see like Damion and Rachel who are very, like it takes
them a little bit more to get going or they are frustrated when they
don't get it. And the one day I gave them both kudos because at

the beginning of class, I have been trying to make a point to go and touch base with people and ask them what their goals are gonna be like what they want to get done at the end of the class. And Rachel had mentioned to me like she hadn't taken her medication that morning so she was really nervous. She came up to me at the end of the class and said Ms. Sterling I still got my goal done and I was like good job Rachel, like that's awesome. So just to see that, it's so cool that kids that are twelve years old can take a math book, and I thought that transition would be hard for Grade 5 to 6 right when that wasn't there last year, like the Grades 7, 8 and 9s have done that before right.

Tamika: ahh just the Grades 8 and 9s

Carrene: but for the 5s 6s and 7s to just do it, and following. Sarnia has been sitting with Austin, and the natural mentorship that has been happening because they have been sitting in the same space together it is cool.

Dahlia: That's neat because I was feeling the same way about the 1 to 3 ELA. Because now we are talking stations all of this is new to me, I've never done any of these things before. Stacy said they do listen to read just get them to do it on their ipads so I said I think I can do that (room erupts in quiet laughter). So between Marie and I we got passwords and things straightened so that they could browse and just like watching the Grade 3s just mentoring the little guys

and showing them what to do and all of a sudden like everyone got influenced and was reading everywhere. I felt almost like kind of useless, but they are doing it and the time alarmed. I said we are going to switch to reading now, no writing now and it just happened. Grade 1 to 3 it just happened the head phones went away and writing came out and different spots were picked like they went to different places because... I think Grade 1 we had to self-regulate. It was just happening and that's a big thing for me because I have never worked with Daily Five.

The reflective moments helped the team members to process how they would deal with sharing their thoughts about the project going forward. As it relates to the team dynamics, the reflection by Shawna was supported by at least two other team members and served to reinforce the team dynamics. Carrene's reflection about how students personalized their learning and mentored each other prompted Dahlia to reflect on and share her own experience with students personalizing and mentoring each other. Their shared experiences served to encourage the team and helped them to see that some of students had it in them to personalize their learning despite the challenges that were being experienced.

Scanning. The scanning activity speaks to those interactions where teachers identify resources that can be used to advance the objectives of the project or program. This activity was evidenced in four of the five meetings observed. One such instance was in meeting E where teachers discussed resources that could be used to help students in ELA.

Dahlia: Ok so that is a good ELA one I was trying to think of which apps were good ELA ones ...

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Stacy: And then I also bought some really great abs, apps, abs no great apps (laughing) for the Grade 1s and...

Dahlia: ohh great apps laughs

Stacy: (laughing) we had this great discussion about yoga balls and hoki stools and your abs so I got abs on the brain

Tamika & Dahlia: (laughing)

Stacy: So I bought some bob book apps as well as a couple of apps that would be good for long vowel sounds and short vowel sounds so I am thinking the . . . of the world and then there is some letter recognition that is good for Miley so I got her started on that one as well

Tamika: Yes awesome

The scanning activity was also evidenced in Meeting B when Denise suggested a resource that could help teachers to see what students have to do in self-directed time and be used by the students to assist them to stay on top of what they have to do in self-directed time.

Denise: Here's a little thing I found that we could use, must do - mustard, may do is mayo and catch up is ketchup and then there is one that you can add that says pickles and that's you can pick because you've got everything else (shows the images in her phone)

Dahlia: I love it

Carla; Well that's nice

Tamika: (laughing) that's cute

Denise: If you want, I can get that made and ordered and ok

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- Shawna:** yeah and then that's
- Tamika:** (interjects) is it something that we can a template that we can type into
- Denise:** Well what I might even do is make a template of it and then if we put one in a plastic folder for each kid, they can write in a dry erase marker
- Tamika:** Or even a permanent marker
- Denise:** But then they can then have their own may do must do catch up pickles sheet that they can keep track in their own goal's binder whatever
- Carenne:** that sounds like a million copies
- Denise:** well or having a poster where it's not going to fit everybody any way so that the whole idea
- Tamika:** So is that where I could put in the things like Tara needs to work on these math facts
- Denise:** Right so you could have inside the folder must dos for Tara and she can have on the outside of the folder what she thinks she must do
- Tamika:** Love it
- Denise:** Ok I got it
- Tamika:** Yeah, I mean If I can have that template so that I can just type them and save them for each kid
- Denise:** Yeah, I will make one today

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Tamika: And then I can print them off

Denise: Yeah,

In these excerpts the participants are engaged in a discussion during which one of the participants identifies resources that could be used to advance the objectives of the initiative. In the first instance Stacy identified apps that she procured that would assist the students to independently work in ELA. While in the second instance Denise suggested a template that could be used as a resource to assist both the teachers and students to keep track of things that could be done in self-directed time.

Weaving. The weaving activity speaks to those interactions where team members make connections across networks to advance mutual activities and build trust. In this instance in meeting C the teachers discussed the spots for ELA/Math. One teacher inquired whether the spots assigned to students in ELA/Math would also apply to them during the project sessions.

Carla: And so these are the spaces they should be in for all subjects?

Every time they are in that particular room, is that right or...

Dahlia: That's a good question

Carla: ...or are we just talking ELA/Math?

Dahlia: ELA/Math? Are you finding the same thing with Math you would like him in a

Carla: Yeah I would try

Dahlia: Or what about projects I don't think I had Kerry for projects yet

Shawna: Projects he did really well

Dahlia: Self-directed time he is not in that room he is in the 1 to 3 room but he is definitely the one I have to watch the most

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- Shawna:** So there is a spot I think in there too is there a spot against the windows with one of those tables
- Dahlia:** I don't know
- Shawna:** If not we can get one there easily
- Stacy:** Not in the 1 to 3 room
- Shawna:** So maybe we need one there for her too so she knows that that is her spot. And maybe what we can do too for ELA /Math is to say that's your spot for self-directed time but if you find she needs to be out doing group work or whatever but we say ohh that's your spot if we have to say self-regulate once then you have to go back to your spot. So we can call it her spot
- Dahlia:** Should we label it as we did with David's
- Shawna:** I think so we can do that
- Carenne:** So that's David's and Kerry's spot
- Shawna:** So, if Kerry is needing the spot she's in it otherwise it can be used if she is not I think does that make sense
- Dahlia:** Sounds good
- Shawna:** Ok so that's Kerry...

Through Carla's question the team made the connection that whatever seating arrangements were being made for self-directed time should be borne in mind in the other class periods as well. The teachers then moved into a discussion to compare how these specific students were working across the different classes, thereby making important connections across the different

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components of the project. The weaving activity was also evidenced in Meeting A, where Carla raised a concern about students not being able to finish their passion project during project time.

Carla: So what if we feel they are going to be crunched for time to be done for Friday, can we use self-directed for next week, rather than try to squish this...

Denise: Absolutely

Dahlia: Sure, why not

Denise: Because at the start they may not have a bunch to fill in their yet...

Dahlia: Right, I think that's a great idea

Carla: Because I think when we were saying on Friday this is due next Friday, they were like....ohhh and now we are taking one of the days to do that

In this excerpt through her question, Carla facilitated the creation of a connection between what was being done in project time and self-directed time, essentially providing the students with additional time to work on their passion projects. It should be noted that at this point in the project, self-directed time was being used to teach students skills that they would need to use as they engaged in personalized learning. The use of self-directed time to complete the passion projects allowed the students to see exactly how self-directed time would work, when the initiative was fully implemented in October with actual projects.

Unleashing. The unleashing activity ensures that everyone who wishes to participate gets a chance to contribute, without fear of repercussion. This activity was observed in Meeting A

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during which teachers shared their challenges with the project thus. Carla, a bit hesitant at first, shared how she was experiencing the project.

Carla: This is how I felt the first time, but back in the day when I had control I felt I had control I would have my fidgeters I would have the kid that needed to stand up once in a while fair enough and had a couple of kids with ADHD you knew you dealt with them honest to God I went home and said I think 90% of my kids now have ADHD. They are falling off the ball they are rolling on the hokey stool they are on the carpet on those scopy chairs it's just like ohhh (loud sigh)

Denise: Then take them away from them

Carla: I am being totally honest

Denise: Please be honest

Carla: I'm like ohh my God they cannot sit still

Denise: Then take it away and keep the table things the same and give them a regular chair and say I am not trying it today. I am self-regulating for all of us because I can't take it, we will try again tomorrow

Carla: I just feel like...

Denise: Go ahead Carla

Carla: We are allowing them to be these little (garbled sound for emphasis) when they don't have to be...

Denise: No,....

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- Carla:**they do not have to act like that
- Denise:**and they shouldn't be and if they are then they are abusing it
- Carla:** Am I the only one, I feel like I am the only one (she looks around the room)
- Dahlia:** No, nope. And is that while you are teaching or is that while they are doing their own work?
- Carla:** It's even my 10 minutes at the end of the day
- Dahlia:** Because I'd disallow it
- Carla:** ... they now have a spot and a chair
- [...]
- Carla:** It's just so much movement
- Dahlia:** When they are working, I do let them pick whatever
- Carla:** That's better
- Dahlia:** But when I am teaching, I can't do it I am not there yet
- Denise:** So, take it back
- Dahlia:** Take it back, stop the madness
- Denise:** Take it back, does that make you feel better or worse (Carla nods her head in agreement)
- Dahlia:** And you can tell them all that Carla cause I did, the same kids heard the speech from me last year "I'm not ready, so you need to do it my way a little longer, when it's me and they heard it they were very compassionate and they did it they will because you have to feel good

Denise: Take it back

While Carla was sharing her challenge there were moments when Denise would encourage her to continue sharing. This prompting from Denise facilitated an atmosphere in which Carla felt safe to share her concern about how the students appeared un-settled in her class. This against the backdrop that the teachers were at different places as it relates to traditional desks and chairs and alternative seating in the classroom. Given the opportunity to air her concern Carla was given the room to share her frustration and was provided with suggestions as to how she could address her challenge. Another example of the unleashing activity was evident when Denise asked the teachers to share their struggles with the project thus far. In response, Shawna shared her struggle with having the right information about what is happening on the days when Dahlia takes on the duties of Stacy. It should be noted that Dahlia is half time at the school and teaches ELA on the days that Stacy teaches kindergarten.

Denise: Ok what are some of the struggles we are having and yes this is a safe open spot we are not going to dwell on anything but let's talk about it to see if we can help each other out here.

Shawna: Sometimes making sure that between Dahlia and Stacy we all have the right information for what's happening between the days

Dahlia: It is funny it is a lot of extra time because we have to wait until the day ends so we are planning until 9 o'clock at night because we have to catch up from what the other person did that's definitely, I

feel like I am working a lot more but I mean that's just a different type of work at a different time.

Tamika: I feel like we are making it work

Dahlia: It is working right now, and we are handling it

Tamika: To me it is going to get a little easier over time

Dahlia: I think September has been a different beast, I think it will

Carla: I know I am ready for October

Dahlia: Me too

Carla: I want October to get into the projects and get rid of the sort of fluffy feeling stuff

Denise: You are speaking my language

Denise's comment, "this is a safe space" opened up the space for Shawna to share her struggles with the project. Through the ensuing discussion the other teachers shared that it has been a difficult transition, however they believed that the situation would get better with time. There is no indication whether this response was helpful to Shawna as the discussion moved to the teachers expressing their desire to get to the teaching of the projects.

Mobilizing. The mobilizing activity includes those actions that draw attention to a particular initiative that could be used to inform what was happening in the project. It could also take the form of persons drawing on the historical information about the organization to inform the current project. In meeting B Dahlia pointed out her concern about not knowing on what

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areas the kids need to work during self-directed time. In response Tamika drew her attention to the assessments that were being worked on that would provide valuable information for the team.

Dahlia: The grade I find and this is going to sound odd, that I feel like self-directed time is most wasted for is the grade 2 For me I feel like its Nicole, Sammy and Julian looking at epic videos or funny cats or something and I'm like what are you guys doing right now. I just feel like grade 2s are pretty big and once we've got data and stuff we'll know. I'm assuming Sammy has probably got some reading to work on and...

Tamika: Absolutely

Dahlia: But I don't know what that is I don't know what they would need but I would love to be just sitting down and doing some one on one with them

Tamika: Yeah part of that is going to come from the assessment results part. Part of that will be coming from Stacy too to think about all the extras that she was always doing with them

Tamika: And remember too EA's will start pulling students for self-directed time as well. Like Tandi is going to have time when she is pulled to work on EIIP stuff

Carla: So when do you think that the assessments are going to get done

Tamika: (slight giggle) I am just waiting on the math ones everything else is done

Carla: Ok so we can start?

Tamika: Yeah but all the results are not in yet like they are still being put in and I have to still go through them but yes I think all the ELA stuff other than us

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going over the writing pre-assessments they are all done it is just the math ones that aren't done

Dahlia: So once you put them in our EAs are entering them somewhere?

Tamika: They are actually being placed in our one drive the Douglas school one drive there is a pre-assessment folder it is in there

Shawna: You don't need to do 50 kids you know this is not our teaching time, in self-directed time we are supposed to be teachers in that we are to help like a regular classroom so it is not on you to

Dahlia: yeah so I walk by a kid like Roger who has been on prodigy for three hours and I think doesn't he need help with reading but I don't really know exactly but I would love to sit with him and read for a bit but I don't know

Tamika: You are correct he struggles with reading so yes

Shawna: So take that approach

Dahlia: So what if I'm guessing

Denise: It doesn't matter, isn't reading a good thing for all ...yes let's do it

In this instance, the team members were reminded that the assessments once completed would provide valuable information that would inform the kind of additional support needed for students. Meeting A provided another instance of the mobilizing activity. In this meeting Denise asked the teachers to share their celebrations and challenges with the initiative three weeks in.

Denise: Ok so K-9 rock stars we are three weeks in and so I think what we need to do is some celebrating talk about what challenges we are having ask some questions and see and see if as a group we can

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answer questions and deal with some of the challenges that we are having.

Shawna: Ok I think one thing that we should keep in mind is...when we had this triad retreat thing we listened to that lady...what was her name again?

Denise: (Name)

Shawna: She was mentioning whenever you are doing meetings and stuff... it should always be solutions focused. So, I think if we come up with a challenge or we come up with a problem we can share but then let's come up with a way that we can help fix it. We have a chance to vent right now so I think we should but then let's have a solution focus. Moving forward what do we do with it. It's a safe space so feel safe to share and reflect. I think in the end let's have a solution forward meeting

Carrene: Definitely makes sense

Shawna drew on a resource that was shared with the triad as it relates to having productive meetings. In this excerpt she encouraged the team to try the solution focused approach as they discussed the challenges that they had been experiencing with the initiative up to that point. This sharing of knowledge provided a useful resource that the teachers used as they discussed the challenges being faced in the project.

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Inviting. The inviting activity is evidenced in actions that seek to invite those persons who are non-participative to join in the discussion. The following excerpt from Meeting E depicts the inviting activity. In this excerpt Marie who is usually quiet in meetings was asked to say whether she was comfortable with the way in which Stacy was suggesting that the 1 to 5 ELA class would unfold the next day.

Stacy: I think you are right. So, here is my plan tomorrow Tamika if this works for you. It's you and I and Marie

Tamika: Yep

Stacy: Ok. So, if we start all together and then we split into the three areas, and Marie you let me know if you are comfortable with this too. I will take the ones and twos and those threes that need to go across to the one two room because that is where Dahlia and I will be...

Tamika and Dahlia: Yeah

Stacy: ...on opposite days. So, we will start the conversation together and I will take them, and we will establish some rules over there about what it is going to look like and reminder of what their job are etc etc. If Tamika takes that 5/6 side with the kids that need to be regulated and you can have a conversation with just them about your expectations. And Marie are you comfortable then taking the 3/4 personalized side the kids that are kind of ready to roll but still

having a conversation about you can earn your way back over there at any time for not showing that your job.

Marie: Yes

Dahlia: And they do need to pick their rounds. So, when I did the schedule, I scheduled everybody except for the ones in that room. So, in it I wrote on there how many to pick of each round so they will have to pick their rounds, and then start.

Marie: So are they redoing that Thursday and Friday then.

Dahlia: They will have to redo it because that is all wrong

Marie: No that is fine

It should be noted that while Marie merely responded in the affirmative to the invitation to share whether she was comfortable with the suggestion made by Stacy, she later continued her participation in the meeting by asking clarifying questions. This excerpt captures three of the four times that Marie spoke during the meeting. The invitation activity was also evident in Meeting A where Denise had issued a call for persons to share their challenges with the project so far.

Denise: So ok we are going to look right now...(as they all look on the screen) Let's every one watch the dots(room erupts) ok while we are waiting on that, ok what other challenges you guys

Karen: Transition time

Tamika: Transition?

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Karen: The very first day I went home, I said to Lenny the kids they are not going to get in there on time, he said “they will figure it out, but do you have a moment?” And I’m like no, I don’t have a moment between when the 1 to 3s leave and the 7 to 9s come in and I think I need a moment whether it’s one minute or 45 seconds and I know it’s taking time away from something but it’s too much for me...

Denise: (interjects) is there a thing you can have them do like can you create that like a procedure that when they come in they do something

Karen: I can forsee that (fades out under SLU interjection)

Tamika: (interjects) yeah cause the only thing I am thinking is that none of us have a moment either to even

Karen: So yes I could I could create things and I have been doing things where they come in and they know what they are supposed to be doing but it’s still me on 100 percent because I am watching to see everyone is not running round crazy and people going to get injured and bla bla like it’s almost like I know I know it’s taking time from someone else and that everyone else is dealing with but there isnt a time for me to take a breath

Dahlia: Cause I feel the same way when I am balancing those workshops when those 1 to 3 come back from phys ed they usually get there before I do and when I get in there and it’s like I need them to settle down but I don’t have time to get my stick in and get things loaded

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(other teachers join in unison - yeah) so I feel you but I don't know what the answer is

Tamika: I'm just saying 4 5s

Dahlia: it's usually the one to 3s that I find are the hairiest the rest seem at least they are in a seat They might be loud

Tamika: yeah

Dahlia: the 1 to 3s are everywhere

Tamika: the 4 to 5s are rough too

Denise: for those of you that are not phys ed teachers when October hits you are not gonna have that anymore because you won't be teaching during that self-directed time as explicitly as you were before. So I can we brainstorm some ideas for Jenna, I am sure she has thought of everything, how can we solve your trouble?

Karen: ahhmm

Denise: Ask for what you need

Karen: (chuckles) I know I think all I need is to either send the 1 to 3s back one minute earlier or have the 7 to 9s wait one minute before they come in like all I'm asking for is one minute ...

In this excerpt we see that the invitation that was issued by Denise for everyone to share the challenges that they were experiencing, from that invitation Karen who was usually quiet and observant in meetings had an opportunity to share.

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The previous section captured examples in the data of the unfolding of eight activities advanced by Raelin (2016) that can be found in the practice of leadership. Through observation I was able to deconstruct the interactions of the group to determine how they engaged in leadership as practice.

Leadership-as-practiceand Problem-Solving Opportunities

From the data collected I noticed that leadership-as-practiceemerged as the team engaged in problem solving opportunities that evidenced a familiar pattern of problematization as people came to a common understanding of the problem under consideration, exploration of the nature of the problem and potential means of addressing it, and finalization in the form of a plan to which all could agree. These opportunities were evident in meetings A, B, C and E. In meeting A (Scenario One), one such problem solving opportunity was brought to the fore through the invitation activity of Denise who asked the team to share the challenges that they had been experiencing with the project thus far. In response Karen indicated that she was having a challenge with the transition time between classes for physical education.

Scenario One

Problematization.

Denise: So ok we are going to look right now...(as they all look on the screen) Let's every one watch the dots(room erupts) ok while we are waiting on that, ok what other challenges you guys

Karen: ahm transition time

Tamika: Transition?

Karen: The very first day I went home, I said to Lenny the kids they are not going to get in there on time, he said "they will figure it out, but do you have a

moment?” And I’m like no, I don’t have a moment between when the 1 to 3s leave and the 7 to 9s come in and I think I need a moment whether it’s one minute or 45 seconds and I know it’s taking time away from something but it’s too much for me...

With the identification of the problem, the team then moves in to an exploration phase where they ask questions to get a better handle on the problem, as well discuss possible solutions.

Exploration.

Denise: (interjects) is there a thing you can have them do like can you create that like a procedure that when they come in they do something

Karen: I can foresee that (fades out under Tamika’s interjection)

Tamika: (interjects) yeah cause the only thing I am thinking is that none of us have a moment either to even

Karen: So yes I could I could create things and I have been doing things where they come in and they know what they are supposed to be doing but it’s still me on 100 percent because I am watching to see everyone is not running around crazy and checking that people aren’t going to get injured. I know, I know it’s taking time from someone but there isn’t a time for me to take a breath.

[...]

Denise: Ask for what you need?

Karen: (chuckles) I know I think all I need is to either send the 1 to 3s back one minute earlier or have the 7 to 9s wait one minute before they come in like all I’m asking for is one minute

[...]

Tamika: what type of things do you have them doing when they come in?

Karen: well because it's such a short period I have them doing something where they are warming up because I don't have time for warm up anymore and uh so they are doing something active immediately which is what they should be doing. So, having them come in and sit down seems like a waste of very precious moments to me...

Cindy: ohh yeah you don't still have a video on the wall there was a time when we use to walk into the room last year and you would have a projector on the wall

Karen: Ohhh yeah, I often will have the projector on and will have something

Shawna: what if because it's the 1 to 3s if you walk them back why don't the 7 to 9s just come back to their room once they are changed like the middle years

Karen: The 1 to 3s I have just been sending I haven't been going back with them

Shawna: Ok so send them back and then 7 to 9s stay in that commons room and then that person who has the 7 to 9s will then go on to their prep so they wait until you come and get them so when you send the 1 to 3s you have a minute to collect yourself and then when you are ready

Denise: So instead of sending the 9s keeping the 7 to 9s

Shawna: Cause we have been just leaving them I would say just wait in the area and I'll let you go in but

Denise: keep them in their learning space

[...]

Karen: yeah that would be good like cause really I need the minute to just take a breath

but I also need it cause I am going from 1 to 3 to 7 to 9 and I have to like

At the end of the discussion about the varying options, it was agreed that the Grades 7 to 9s would be dismissed a few minutes later to allow Karen to have a break between the two groups, with an understanding that this solution would be reviewed.

Finalization.

Denise: So are we good with that get the 7 to 9s to change and come back to their homerooms until its time?

Tamika: Because some take a minute and some take the whole time, so it's hard to know, because I have been giving them that 5 minutes but is it too much is it not enough, but some need it so

Karen: You know they've mostly been in there I am surprised the 7 to 9s have been quick changing and getting in there

Carla: Then maybe they don't need to be dismissed until the 5-minute buzzer goes

Denise: Maybe they are just getting out too early...

Karen: Yeah maybe that might...

Denise: because that might give you an extra...If you only let them out two minutes early there is a three minute

Karen: Yeah cause even if I had a couple of kids filter in like that's fine but it's because they are all there (breaks off laughing)

Carla: That would be the 11:27 timer?

Karen: No because 11:35 is when they go for gym

[...]

Shawna: so maybe 33

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Dahlia: Yah

Denise: perfect let's try it

Karen: let's try it

Denise: And then we will reassess next PD day which is next Friday

Carla: So, dismiss them later are they to come back or just dismiss them later

Tamika: I think just dismiss them later

Karen: Yeah just dismiss them later

In meeting C (Scenario Two), the teachers walked into this meeting having already identified the problem to be discussed. Stacy explained that the teachers had identified that some of the students needed additional supports to help them to self-regulate during class.

Scenario Two

Problematization.

Stacy: We have got some kids that need some more specific supports and so we are just gonna pull those supports together for them find them a place

Given that the problem was identified prior to this meeting the team came ready to discuss solutions to the identified problem. Prior to the meeting Dahlia compiled a document which provided a possible approach to addressing the differing needs of the students. This document was used as the starting point for the discussion in the meeting kickstarting the collective exploration phase. The mobilization activity was also illustrated in this interaction as Stacy encouraged the teachers to ensure that a student used the spot he has been assigned.

Exploration.

Shawna: (Looking at a sheet of paper – later found out it was Dahlia’s document) I think we need to identify who is maybe more of a behaviour or not choosing because I think there is that line of who is not choosing and who just can’t yet. Like I mean we know Miley can’t yet, Jonothan can’t yet. Like Jonothan needs that, so I think it would be more teaching moments for them right and they will need support with that whereas I have a feeling that there are a couple on there that would hopefully be able to pull it together fast

Stacy: Change, around quickly, yes

Dahlia: Well the interesting thing about the comments too, like what we are seeing might be different than what you are seeing. Like that point you guys made this morning

Stacy: I hadn't realized that until you made that comment this morning

Shawna: Well I just noticed

Dahlia: Like if you like math

Stacy: You’re doing your thing

Shawna: Like that one specific kid who gives you grieve in ELA like Tim, like he is I don't find any problems in Math

[....]

Dahlia: Where do we have Janice, Organization time management focused staying on task

Shawna: Which is she needs a spot that is quite for that to happen so

Stacy: Ok so that's environment

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Shawna: Yeah

Dahlia: Because I did break the list again into little things and I think that's where she is

Shawna: So for those like James maybe identifying more with him like on scales like maybe more repetition with that kind of stuff you know what I mean because Tamika was saying you guys talked about having more

Dahlia: And I was actually wondering if we shouldn't get them on the tables like even last year you had them right there

Shawna: So its way easier to identify right now

Dahlia: So we get scales on the table

[...]

Shawna: Ok so force spots, so if we are thinking about getting these rooms set up for spots.

Dahlia: So Malik has a spot

Shawna: Malik has one so he should be using it for sure

Stacy: Please make him use it; it is not optional it is not just, for when he needs it

Shawna: and scooting around the room like he seems to be wanting to move it to every place in the room.

Stacy: No up against the wall, that's why he has that spot

The teachers then agreed that they would implement the assigned seating arrangements the next day, outlining exactly how they would go about implementing the changes in terms of the conversation that they would have with the students.

Finalization.

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Careene: Ok so how do we do this tomorrow?

Shawna: We talk to them in the morning during home room explain to them that this is not punitive we had told them that if they were not able to self-regulate we would regulate for them and this is that we are helping them to do their best learning.

In both instances we see the team collaboratively discussing the different elements of the problem, exploring different options and agreeing on a final course of action. It should be noted that while Denise was a part of the first meeting she was not involved in meeting C. Her absence in this second meeting speaks to the point that leadership activity in this school is not always centered around or dependent on the presence of the positional leader. Leadership-as-practice was driven by the experiences and expertise of all the parties to the practice in the moment as they collectively determined how to best meet the needs of their students. This point is important as it provides evidence of the role of the teachers in the leadership process at the Douglas school.

Leadership-as-practice at the Douglas School: A Collective and Collaborative Process

This segment explores the participant's thoughts about leadership and how they viewed the process unfold during the implementation of the project. While several individuals described leadership as being imbued in the role of the principal, there were many instances where leadership was referred to as a collective process that was carried out by all participants involved in the implementation of the project. The learning philosophy supervisor Keisha explained that working as a team was a key element of the learning philosophy being implemented at the school. In her view, every teacher in the building took on leadership as the project unfolded:

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they have been able to take strengths, grow those strengths, become leaders in them and so every teacher in that building has now taken on the leadership in certain areas and collectively they come together around it. Obviously, the principal is going to be dealing with ultimate parent and student issues I suppose, and the managing of the building and the budget and that kind of thing. But the leaders around the building in their areas will be able to go and have that conversation and say we need this because. It is not here is the problem solve it, no we are solving it collectively and we will come to you either with our consensus and see if you are on board or we can't get past this point and we need some more guidance. – **Keisha**

Keisha's comment speaks to the interaction in which the teachers engaged as they collectively worked together to implement the initiative. Shawna and Stacy, in talking about how they saw leadership happening, echoed Keisha's comment about all teachers being leaders in their own right, as well as collectively:

everybody here is a leader we are all decision makers, this is collective leadership. And I would still say that yes Denise makes the big decision but the day to day things is a combined group I would say every person has leadership in some way in some capacity I would say from day to day at our school. – **Shawna**

we are all leaders in our own way and that we all have a piece and expertise in some area that we can lead and bring to the table and bring to our group. So, when I talk about our small ELA group, I might bring everybody back but then it might be someone else at another time... I feel, at times that we all have a chance to be a leader in some way. Sometimes, I will take a step back because it's not my comfort zone. I feel that Denise

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gives us that chance. I don't ever ever ever with her feel like she is the boss. I feel like she is one of us. Somebody that we can go to. She is giving us the chance to all be leaders. She is so willing to say, "I don't know anything about this". You need to lead this piece or this is your expertise. I really really admire that and respect her for that. She can step up to be that leader when she needs to be but, most of the time she is one of us. So, that's how I kind of feel that it's working in this building... And then when she just needs to be the leader and make the decision. She just makes the decision. – **Stacy**

Dahlia explained that her understanding of leadership shifted from one that was leader-centric to one of shared understanding, particularly because the initiative required all teachers to work collaboratively as they implemented the project:

I used to define leadership - there was a leader and they made sure that we are all doing what we needed to be doing. Honestly this year I have never seen leadership look more differently. We all have something that we bring to the table, and I feel that Denise insists upon experts leading what they are good at. For me that was a bit of a shift because I just need the leader to be the leader but now I see that she makes sure that we are all doing our job and makes sure that the place is functioning but there are certain things that if someone is stronger at that they should be the leader at it they should be the one that's handling it because they have the most expertise and that is more trust from her and she is still overseeing it. There is nothing that goes on here that she doesn't know but I do notice the most transfer of leadership happening this year for sure... It is very shared it is very collaborative, and I think in this environment it has to be. I still see Denise as the person that I check in with partly out of respect but also again out of her personalized learning knowledge and access to knowledge. But otherwise most things we would just

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share the leadership in ourselves because we are all doing the same thing we are all here for the same purpose and I don't feel like there is anyone of us that is way off base. I think you would need to draw your principal in more if you had somebody in left field. Whereas we are all there for the same purpose there is little hiccups along the way but we yeah, I think it is definitely more shared now. – **Dahlia**

Dahlia used the term “transfer of leadership” when she talked about leadership that suggested Denise had to some extent transferred leadership to the team. Additionally, in talking about the process of leadership, both Shawna and Stacy referenced what Denise did to facilitate shared leadership. Denise explained that her position on how leadership should happen stemmed from her own experiences as a teacher and books that she read. She believed that teachers should be empowered to lead:

I am not in the classroom, I am in my own classroom so it shouldn't be me making those decisions and I always read things, I read a lot of principal books and stuff because I am brand new and I am trying to learn still but they always say don't forget what it is like to be in the classroom and I would take that a step further and say let the people who are in the classroom make the decisions for God's sake what am I here to do other than to support that I mean unless something is going horribly wrong if a teacher is making a student stand in the corner on their head or something ok I am stepping in. They are doing amazing work let them handle it. It empowers them I feel like. - **Denise**

The teachers indicated that they were involved in the leadership of the project through collaborative decision making as it related to the day to day operation of the initiative. Denise was seen as playing a crucial role in the process through the creation of an enabling environment

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in which teachers were empowered to take ownership as they engaged in the leadership process. This was also evidenced in at least two of the meetings where Denise was not in attendance. During these meetings the teachers discussed the challenges they had, and provided solutions that they implemented to improve the initiative. Dahlia elaborated on the delicate balance that was maintained between formal leadership and shared leadership that ensues as the project unfolded:

I think we try to collaboratively decide as much as we can but at some point, someone has to make a decision. And that is what I am noticing we all have input and sometimes collaboratively someone will come up with something and we will all be like yes let's try that. I don't think that there is anything that we do that we don't still run by Denise, for me personally I would hate for somebody to say to her this is what we are doing now and here you go (laughing). So, I don't ever want her to feel in the dark but again there are some things that just have to be decided top down like the self-directed time. She called a meeting about self-directed time specifically and basically said we all need to be on the same page. So collaboratively we are all coming up with ideas but when we are not really coming up with one solid plan then I think that is where that triad of her and Shawna and Tamika have to step in and say let's do this, because we all just need to be doing this, unless there is any major opposition that usually works as well.- **Dahlia**

From this excerpt the balance between the formal and informal leadership is brought to the fore, as there are instances where the team could not collaboratively determine the way forward and, in those instances, the final decision for the direction in which to go was left in the hands of the positional leader.

Factors that Enable Leadership as Practice

This section highlights a number of factors that supported the success of the initiative by facilitating activities that enabled leadership as practice: the REORDER framework; the establishment of trust; resources that helped to structure and support information and/or processes, and; self and other awareness.

The REORDER framework. The strategic priorities of distributed leadership and environment described in the REORDER framework supported the way in which leadership-as-practice was enacted during the implementation of the project. As Shawna and Denise pointed out:

I think the big changes that we made in terms of the schedule fall under environment and the learning environment and because of the changes that we have made it has impacting all the other letters of REORDER. – **Denise**

Basically our schedule has kind of pushed that which I love because I love team. But there has been some hard parts to it and that is making sure that everybody is on the same page. And I think being comfortable to speak out when you are not. Because I think there has been a few instances where people are holding it back or holding it in, and that makes it hard for a collective team agreement if you hold things in because then you feel that resentment or you're not heard or whatever. So we are still growing in that I think but we have grown so far in this. I mean I love the team I love that aspect and I love being there as a strong team for our kids right, so we are so strong together.- **Shawna**

These changes allowed the team to adjust the way in which they worked to be more collaborative in order to facilitate co-teaching. The move to increased collaboration in teaching brought the

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teachers together in new ways that drove them to interact and depend on each other as they worked on the project. The increased collaboration facilitated the building of the team that in turn facilitated the shared approach to leadership.

As it relates to the distribution of leadership, the strategic priority of “we are all learners that lead” supported the development of the team culture. Team members became involved in activities that required them to engage in leadership work. Denise spoke of the development of distributed leadership:

I think as an administrator I have been distributing leadership since I got here. I am very open with them and saying I am not the keeper of knowledge I will find answers if I need to, but these teachers have worked here why would I disregard their experience in anything that I am trying to lead. So I think back to the creation of our schedule Keisha and I kind of started it and then Shawna and I worked on it, but in the end Shawna was the keeper of it, I felt. She was the one making the tweaks at the end and so it started from Keisha and then me and then I handed it off. And it wasn't handing it off as like here is a to do list we did it together and you had ownership of it you were handling it so I didn't need to.... Everybody has their strengths. So that is easy for me to distribute in the K-9 it is so easy because we are such a team. - **Denise**

Although the initiative evolved over time in response to local contextual needs, the REORDER Framework helped to set the stage for the ways in which individuals oriented themselves to the project and how the project was structured in its initial design.

Trust. A key factor supporting leadership-as-practicewas that of trust. Trust was developed between the teachers and the administrator. Trust of the parents was granted to the

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teachers and by extension the school. Parents trusted that school members would operate in the best interest of the students. There was also an atmosphere of trust that existed between the administrator and the teachers as well as among the teachers themselves. As Dahlia explained the environment of trust that existed among the team members enabled them to work together:

We are the ones running it and we have Denise's full trust... I think because those check-ins happen and we know that we have her trust I think we just feel like we are the soldiers kind of running the floor so we know she trusts us. – **Dahlia**

This feeling of trust existed among the team members, as well. Keisha explained that their openness as a staff aided in the success of the team:

Part of it is your relationships your vulnerability, your risk taking, where are you at on those spectrums, we know that some people are going to tell you what you want to hear no matter what and they go home and they get into an environment where they are comfortable and they are like 'I may not be on board with this' 'I am struggling with this' it is the hope that at a certain point that they can feel comfortable that they can do that in their own building. It is not about judgement and that is a staff culture piece. I would venture to say that that staff over there are pretty open, not a 100 percent but pretty darned open. That is a huge thing for them.- **Keisha**

The latter sentiment spoke to the level of trust that exists among the teachers in the school and how this level of trust engendered by the openness of the staff supported how the activities of leadership unfolded as the team worked together. This atmosphere of trust is evidenced as well during the invitation activities in Meeting A where the staff members felt free to share their thoughts about the challenges that they had been experiencing in the project. The atmosphere of

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trust also contributed to creating an enabling environment where the team members were open and willing to collectively working on the problem solving opportunities that presented themselves during the implementation of the initiative.

Resources that help to structure and support information and/or processes. There were several resources that helped to structure and support the interactions of the educators as they implemented the learning initiative. These resources, consisting of Dahlia's documents and the software program One-Note played an integral role in how leadership unfolded in the project.

Dahlia's documents. Dahlia's documents (so named by the teachers) appeared at the centre of two meetings and had a structuring effect. Teachers added and subtracted from the document as they charted their way forward in the initiative. The notes were used in a meeting in which the teachers reviewed how to improve self-directed time, and during the ELA adjustment meeting. These documents appeared to guide the flow of the meeting and aided in the decision-making process. In Meeting C the document provided a list of the students who would possibly need additional supports to help them to self-regulate. As Dahlia explained, the document provided a starting point for the discussion.

We kind of sat around and discussed it. I honestly think from just the discussion that came from that (the document), was how the decisions got made. Because it did seem to transfer then to the ELA meeting and the math meeting so that would have been the list that we were talking about self-regulation breaking that all up we used that definitely to help us when we were fixing up ELA. – **Dahlia**

The following interaction captures how a few of the teachers responded to the document.

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Dahlia: Quite literally we have been muttering at each other going we need to take things back here but then it is not personalized and that means we are doing it wrong, so we have just been batting that around. The actual sit-down let's figure this out didn't happen until Friday after school like for half an hour. And then I started barfing my brain out all over one drive here and sent it out to all of you

Stacy: It is perfect I love it when you do that because it's all planned.

Dahlia: Why thank you and this is how I relax all the tension went out of me as I was writing all of this. So, it is good it is good for me. It helps me.

Tamika: Well that is good

The implementation team welcomed the document that worked as a stabilizing element. It assisted the team to visualize possible solutions to the challenges being discussed. Dahlia explained that the impetus in creating these documents was to make sure she had a good grasp of what was happening with the project. This desire was fueled by her need to be accountable to parents and to assist the staff to process possible solutions to the challenges that emerged in the midst of a hectic implementation process. These notes captured her thoughts on the matters that were being discussed, and helped her to process her thinking, after which she shared it with the other teachers:

I feel I am accountable to all these parents. I guess maybe because I am one too, and I am in the community and a lot of them are catching me at the rink. So, I just feel like I need an answer and I feel like if I don't sit down and hammer out an answer, we have nothing to start from. I also see an extraordinarily busy staff with high burn out rates I think right

now we seem a little bit more level, but I figure the burn out is going to come again soon because we do seem pretty level right now. But no one has time, no one has time to sit down and process what everybody's been saying, and I know that is how I learn best. Most of our staff what I am seeing is auditory, Stacy particularly she can talk anything out in there and she can go, I can't learn anything unless I get it down on paper so I may never look at that paper again, but I have to get it down there. So, if I am going to get it down there I may as well put it down there and share it with everybody else and then it seems to be a good base for a conversation it seems to help center us a little bit. – **Dahlia**

One Note . The use of One Note , a computer program used for information gathering, also played a role in the meetings observed. The program served as a hub for everything on which the teachers worked, including meeting agendas, meeting notes, and students' work. Parents also had access to see what students were working on. One Note was used to keep all the resources for the projects, as well as keep teachers connected with each other as they worked on implementing the initiative. Instead of printing meeting agendas the principal would pull up the meeting agendas from One Note which was then projected on the screen during the meetings. Stacy and Shawna explained that One Note allowed the teachers to maintain consistent understandings as they worked together:

It has kept us all on the same page where we can each see like the teachers can see everything hopefully for the kids its helping to keep them organized because everything can be there instead of having all these lose papers I like that I can use One Note on my phone on my laptop on my computer at home on my IPAD I know that I have done marking sitting in the car, you know we are on our way to the city I can mark a few spelling quizzes. I love One Note I think that was a good call we keep everything in

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there, there is no lost papers there is no what did I do with that where did I document that its right there. -**Stacy**

We have One Note that we can share out to our kids and then we also have a staff one and we put our staff meeting notes we put anything we want to share between us like reading minutes or anything like that this is like an ongoing document place to house everything together. So we also have like a space for documentation on students so that everybody can kind of check in there to see and also record if anything has come up with them, so again everybody is on the same page. So if you look on our One Note we can see ohh that is where we corrected the behaviour. Right so that is another check in working as a team to know that everybody is on the same page or if it has happened before or whatever. - **Shawna**

In one of the meetings observed, One Note was used to access the meeting's agenda. During the meeting the discussion moved to resources for the project. Denise accessed One Note and brought everyone's attention to where they could locate the resource needed. The use of the program allowed the teachers to have needed information at their fingertips as they discussed the way forward in their meetings. In the following interaction, the teachers tried to determine what the schedule for self-directed time should look like. In the middle of the discussion one-note was accessed to provide the team with the needed information.

Dahlia: It is the gold side of me in this, I don't know what's going on that will be my challenge with this

Carla: Where is our like timetable

Dahlia: I don't know I think I looked for it on one drive before and haven't found it

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Carla: Because we wrote down in which rooms they were going to be, that's on some note we got

Denise: The 1 to 3s are in the 1 2 room

Shawna: It would be the same rooms probably

Denise: so ok we are going to look right now...(as they all look on the screen)

Let's every one watch the dots(room erupts) ok while we are waiting on that, ok what other challenges you guys

The teachers also used the program to document their observations as they tracked the behaviour of students, allowing them to all have accurate data in front of them as they made decisions.

Self and other awareness. During their meetings the teachers regularly referenced their personality types as they interacted with each other. Denise indicated that prior to the start of the project, teachers engaged in a Professional Development session about different personality types. Teachers learned how their personality types affected their responses to each other and how they dealt with change. In the following excerpt Tamika outlined the different personality types and the value that comes with knowing the personality types of her colleagues:

Well, just quickly, gold is the organized list making get it done style. Orange, they get stuff done, but on their own time and they don't necessarily make a list and they seem completely disorganized to the gold people. Blue are the feelings people. So, they worry about everything they do or say. Are they hurting someone else feelings? They are more worried about what other people think. Green are the analyzers. The analytical thinkers, they want to know the why's. WHY! Why are we doing this? They can come across as kind of blunt. So, blues I have a lot of blue in me, will get hurt and their feelings will get

hurt by the green's who just say what's on their mind. So, we have done a lot of work in that in understanding them. What each of us need to be successful and to be happy. So, I am always taking into account those things and what I know about my colleagues. As I say ok, let's get this done! But I understand, you know, what one person might need like Dahlia and I understand what she might need, and I know that what Carla might need may be different things. – **Tamika**

The continued referencing of the personality types during their conversations with each other and during their conversations suggested that the teachers had internalized this knowledge. They were acutely aware of their personality tendencies and that of their colleagues. Shawna pointed out that the staff were generally understanding of each others' patterns of interaction, attributing this to the fact that most staff members had blue personality types:

We can be understanding we are like the bluest staff ever and we all know each other so well like we understand each other if you were busy and you didn't get to that its ok you know what I mean. – **Shawna**

Dahlia referred to her and Stacy's blue personalities to explain why they were timid at first to approach Tamika about their concerns with ELA instruction. In the following excerpt she further shared insight into the personality types of some of the members of the team.

Interviewer: Talk to me some more about that concept that you are both kind of blue, what do you mean?

Dahlia: Yes, we are both blue in the sense that we don't like confrontation or conflict so we will do almost anything to avoid it and if hit with it we both get emotional I would say in our own ways. Just in a sense that we are also very good at seeing everybody's perspective which can be a blessing and a

course because when you can see everybody's perspective you can also feel all of their feelings too right and I would say that is probably the weakness of her and I. It is hard for us to push through what we want to see happen because we don't want to hurt anybody and we don't want to offend anybody and we also do not want a conflict to break out. So, I think that is that side of us.

Interviewer: And what about the rest of the team?

Dahlia: Again they are pretty balanced (NAME) can be very blue too which is why I think she hangs back when she isn't sure the only time she is going to push forward and become more green is if she knows for sure what she is saying is right and then she will say it, and that is why I said she will make me think because the rest of the time I know she is hanging back because she isn't sure or doesn't want the conflict, whereas I think (NAME) is trying to get to the Gold get it done that is that gold side of her she wants to just get the goal done let's stop digressing and get it done, and again (NAME) can float both ways I have seen her be both people, so she can be either or.

The knowledge that the teachers had of their personality types and working with each other helped them to navigate the ways in which they worked together on implementing the project. It reduced interpersonal conflict and helped them to be more meta-cognitively focused on the project and not to internalize critique as a personal attack.

Summary

In this chapter I sought to explore how leadership-as-practicewas enacted during the implementation of school improvement initiative at the Douglas School. Instances of eight activities of leadership advanced by Raelin (2016) were explored as they occurred during the team meetings that were observed. Team members also shared how they saw the process of leadership unfold as they worked on the improvement initiative. Through an analysis of the recurring themes that emerged from the data a number of factors that enabled the process of leadership were found. The process of leadership that emerged during the implementation of this initiative was guided by the contextual peculiarities of the learning philosophy being implemented by the team that required a collaborative working environment. The upcoming chapter discusses findings in the context of current and previous literature in the rural school leadership and school improvement field.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion and Reflection

The impetus for this inquiry emerged from my keen interest in school leadership, school improvement and the contextual complexities of rural schools. Consequently, my objective in this case study was to utilize a practice lens to explore how the socially constituted phenomenon of leadership is enacted in a Saskatchewan rural K – 12 school during the implementation of a school improvement initiative. Team meetings were observed to see how leadership-as-practice occurred in these meetings. Participants were also asked to share their perspectives on how the process of leadership unfolded as they implemented project. Project documents including collateral material and meeting notes, along with conversations with the participants were used to gather background information on the school, as well as to gather information on the conceptualization and implementation of the initiative.

The data collected in this study were organized and analyzed to answer the following research questions.

1. How is leadership-as-practice manifested during the implementation of a school improvement project in one rural Saskatchewan school?
2. What factors in the socio-material environment appear to influence how leadership-as-practice is enacted within the school improvement initiative in one rural Saskatchewan school?
3. How do the activities of leadership-as-practice appear to enable the successful implementation of the rural school improvement initiative?

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Given the importance of leadership to the school improvement process, having a clear understanding of how the leadership phenomena unfolds is essential (Harris, 2003). In the case of rural schools, studies of leadership have predominantly adopted a leader-centric focus to understanding how leadership happens. Alternatively, a practice perspective of leadership provides a more nuanced understanding of how leadership happens as it is “less about what one person thinks or does and more about what people may accomplish together” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 3). With this in mind, this study sought to capture leadership-as-practice during the implementation of the school improvement initiative by paying attention to the mutually discursive actions and interactions of all those involved. In my observations of the team meetings I sought to identify eight activities advanced by Raelin (2016a) in his framework for leadership-as-practice. I was guided by the premise that to get close to the practice required paying attention to the routine activities of the participants. Dialogue provided access to the tacit behavior of the participants as they engaged in leadership work. My aim was not to capture all of the activities of the school actors, but to focus on the instances of leadership-as-practice related to the school improvement project. Consequently, my observations of the team were limited to the project meetings and the activities in which school members engaged during the day to day implementation of the project.

Chapter Six provides a discussion of the ways in which major findings related to how leadership-as-practice was enacted during the implementation of the school improvement initiative at the Douglas School. The factors that fostered leadership as practice, as well as the activities of leadership that enabled the implementation of the project are discussed. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for practice and theory and areas for future research.

Discussion of Findings

This study evolved from my curiosity about how leadership happens during the implementation of a rural school improvement initiative. Wells (2003) pointed out that rural schools are continually seeking flexible and innovative approaches to meet student needs. This innovative drive that fuels the creative activities of some rural schools is born out of a need to remain viable in the face of challenging circumstances including declining enrollment, non-existent administrative staff, and operational isolation due to their long distances from other schools. In my conceptual framework for this inquiry I surmised that the contextual complexities faced by rural schools have resulted in these schools being forced to become innovative in their operations, resulting in a focus on continuous improvement as a way of life. A key component to the success of school improvement initiatives is school leadership. Newton and Riveros (2015) contend that school leadership is generally viewed as the “exercise of a variety of political agency that rests on powerful individuals within organizational contexts” (p. 335). Indeed, a review of the literature on rural school leadership framed the leadership phenomena through accounts that focused on the positional leader, and or the context within which they lead. Influenced by the turn to practice in social theory, I wanted to examine rural school leadership from an alternate perspective which sought to look beyond what the positional leader knows or does in order to study the process of leadership. In this section, responses to each of the research questions that were explored in this study are offered.

Manifestations of Leadership as Practice

The first research question asked, “how is leadership-as-practicemanifested during the implementation of a school improvement project in one rural Saskatchewan school?” As the staff of Douglas School worked together to implement the initiative that supported the Riverside

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School Division's learning philosophy, a shared sense of ownership of the project and collective desire to have students succeed was evidenced. Their sense of responsibility to do well, and to "do right" by the students was bolstered by the strong relationships that school members had with the community, and with each other. This sense of ownership undergirded the way in which the team operated, allowing them to collectively negotiate the ways in which they needed to adjust the project so that they were able to successfully meet the curriculum outcomes of the project while remaining true to the learning philosophy being implemented. It is in the push and pull of the collective negotiation of the way forward that leadership-as-practice unfolded.

Most rural school leadership studies adapt a leader-centric focus in describing how leadership happens. The application of the practice approach where I paid attention to the activities of the team allowed me to understand how leadership unfolded at the Douglas School. The data showed that the activities advanced by Raelin (2016a) were found in leadership practice at the Douglas school, and facilitated collective negotiation as the team engaged in leadership work. More specifically, they "produced direction for organizing" the ways in which the initiative was implemented (Crevani & Endrisatt, 2016, p. 23). From my observations and conversations with the participants, the process of leadership was collaborative and linked to problem solving opportunities that patterned themselves around problematization, exploration of the problem context and potential strategies, and finalization of a plan that openly allowed for alternatives to be examined later if the strategies were not successful.

Robinson (2018) makes the point that the "hardest part of change is not its planning but its implementation because that involves the uncertain and complex process of integrating and aligning the new practices with hundreds of existing practices" (p. 13). In the case of the Douglas school the implementation of the improvement initiative presented a number of problems that the

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team had to work their way through. These problem-solving opportunities saw the team engaging in a three-stage problem solving process, as depicted in figure 6.1 namely problematization, exploration and finalization of the course of action. These stages are similar to the Simplexity creative problem-solving framework advanced by Dr. Min Basadur. This problem-solving framework has its roots in the creative problem solving model advanced by Alex Osborn in 1942 which promotes divergent and convergent thinking through a three step process namely, fact finding, idea finding and solution finding (Puccio & Murdock, 2005). Osborn's problem solving model responded to "the need for an explicit or defined creative process (and also) resulted in the articulation of preliminary guidelines and tools for generating ideas" in educational settings (Treffinger & Isaksen, 2005, p. 343). Osborn's creative problem solving model has passed through several iterations. Treffinger and Isaksen (2005) outlined that in extending his model Osborn worked with Sidney Parnes to enhance "students' ability to understand and apply their personal creativity in all aspects of their lives" (p. 344) in the American education system resulting in a five stage model of the creative problem solving. According to Basadur, Runco and Vega (2000), Basadur used "real-world, organizational application experience and field research to extend the basic Osborn three- and five-step models" (p. 80). I am drawn to Basadur's Simplexity model as there is a strong focus "on defining and isolating the true nature of a problem before actually trying to implement a solution and (it also) encourages true collaboration and respect for different thinking styles" (Dong & Dave, 2014, p.38). Collaboration was evident as the team from Douglas collectively problem solved the varying challenges they faced during the implementation of the project, the activities of leadership-as-practice were evidenced.

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The first stage, the problematization phase, involved the identification of an issue or problem that needed to be addressed. This is what Basadur, Runco and Vega (2000) described as “problem finding” phase in the Simplexity creative problem-solving framework. From the data, the identification of a problem typically arose during the enactment of the initiative in a classroom and was brought forward to a meeting by team members for an opportunity to collaboratively problem-solve. This was the case in meeting C where the teachers met to discuss the needed academic supports to address the lack of student self-regulation observed in some classes. Other times a problem was identified during a meeting in dialogue about teacher experiences with the implementation of the project and refined through a clarification process. This was evidenced, for example, in meeting B when questions regarding teacher scheduling during self-directed time brought forward issues of the need for more teacher preparation time and student support. The inviting, reflecting and unleashing activities of leadership practice were evidenced during the problematization phase. The inviting activity was evidenced in the problematization phase in meeting A as the team engaged in a review of the project to date. During this meeting, Denise invited the team to share any challenges that they were facing. In response, Karen explained that she was having a challenge with the transition time between each group of students coming in for physical education. This challenge became the focus of the team. As they tried to collaboratively find a solution for Karen, they transitioned into the exploration phase of the problem-solving process.

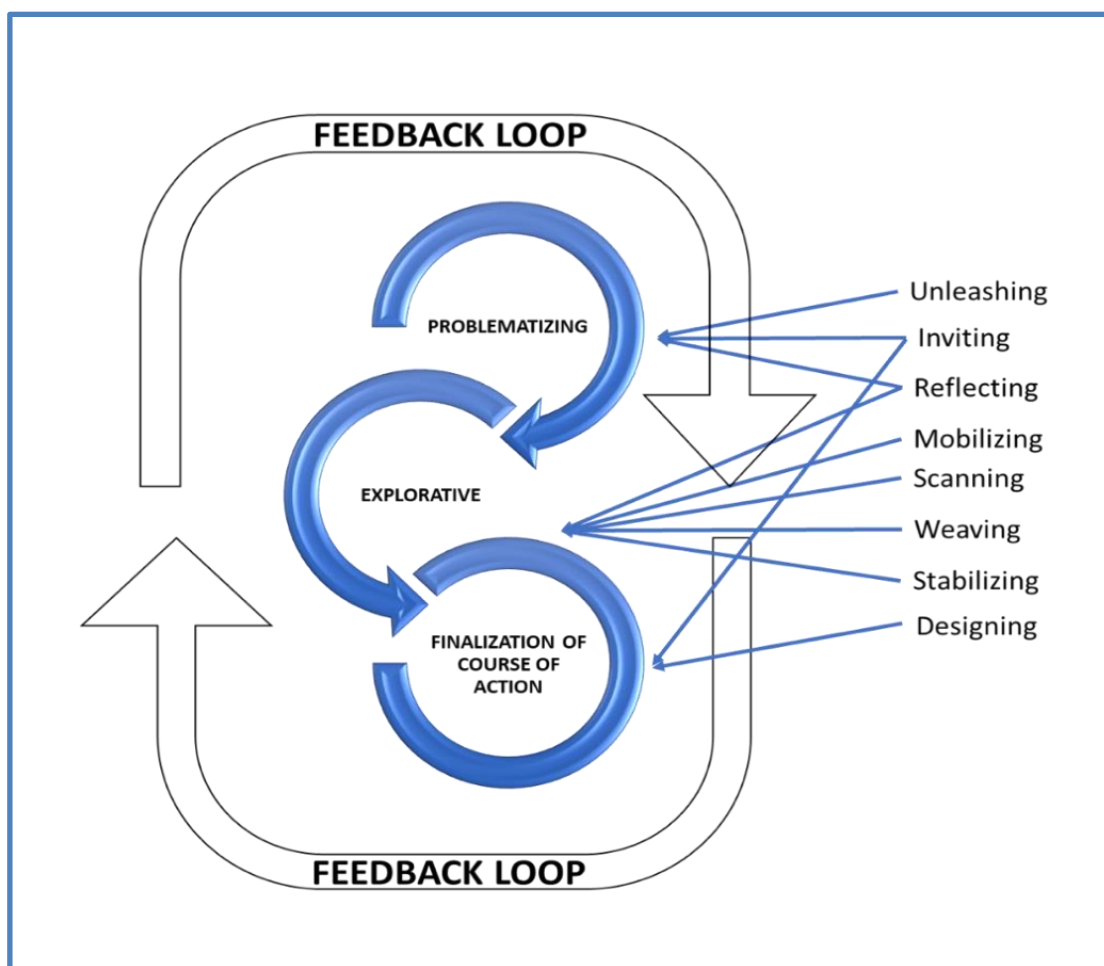


Figure 6.1: Problem-solving phases and their links to the activities of leadership-as-practice

The teachers engaged in the exploration phase as they collectively brainstormed possible solutions to the problems identified. This exploration phase could be likened to Basadur, Runco and Vega's (2000) "problem solving" step in which "useful imaginative solutions" to the problem is identified (p. 79). As evidenced during the observation of the team meetings, once the educators identified a problem, they collectively began to explore viable alternatives. During this discussion the teachers also engaged in reflecting, mobilizing scanning, weaving, and stabilizing activities identified in the leadership-as-practice framework. As they engaged in this phase, they brought together their unique perspectives to fuel the collective problem-solving process and creatively negotiate the direction that they would take. For example, the reflecting

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activity was evidenced in meeting B as Dahlia shared her personal reflection on what number of teachers were necessary to support self-directed time, recognizing that another teacher could have been excused to be able to work with students on student support. This reflection was met with affirmation from the team members who then engaged in a discussion of possible options to allow all the teachers to get preparation time by releasing them from self-directed time. The stabilizing activity was evidenced during the exploration phase in meeting B as the teachers discussed how to help students self-regulate so that they would be better able to personalize their learning. Through dialogue, teachers were able to stabilize the process for students who needed different levels of support. Scanning was evidenced in meeting E as teachers discussed a need to restructure ELA instruction. The group conducted a scan of apps that could be used for different grade levels to support learning. In meeting B the mobilizing activity was evidenced when Tamika brought the group's attention to the role of the assessments and how they would contribute to the work in which students were engaging during self-directed time. The weaving activity was evidenced as teachers sought to make sure that whatever was happening during self-directed time in terms of the assigned spots, was also done during the ELA and Math time periods. All of these activities took place during the exploration phase as teachers explored the context of the problem and brought forth possible alternatives for dealing with the concern.

Once teachers had collectively explored possible alternatives to problems that had arisen during implementation, they moved to a finalization stage where they settled on some decisions they would try as a collective. In this phase they also recapped strategies so that everyone understood the plan for moving forward, and clarified responsibility for action in terms of who would be responsible for what actions, when. This phase is what Basadur, Runco and Vega (2000) described as the "solution implementation activity" in the creative problem-solving process (p.78).

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The designing and unleashing activity of leadership practice were both evidenced during this phase. The designing activity was evidenced during meeting E with the ELA team as Stacy recapped the group's intent to establish rules with teachers responsible for different grade levels during classes on the upcoming Thursday and Friday. In fact, this activity was based on a "re"design of past practice that needed to be changed. This was important because it also suggests that there is a constant feedback loop in the problem-solving phases that revisits past practice in order to determine if original strategies were sufficient, or if new strategies had to be incorporated. The unleashing activity was also evidenced during this meeting when Stacy prompted Marie to let her know if the plan put in place would actually work for her without assuming agreement. During the finalization phase the team reviewed and finalized an agreed upon course of action to address an identified problem and ensured that everyone was committed and able to execute the strategies.

It should be noted that having gone through the problem-solving phases as they engaged in leadership work the team allowed room for feedback after they implemented the agreed-on solution to the problems identified. To this end the team members allowed room to learn from the changes that they would have made to further improve the implementation of the initiative. This feedback is captured in through the feedback loop in figure 6.1 The value of the feedback is seen for instance in Meeting E during which the ELA team used what was learned from the changes made in Meeting C where the team had discussed and agreed on some strategies to assist students to self-regulate. The ELA team learning from this experience made additional changes to the structure of ELA by having a teacher lead section of the class and a personalized section. With this change the students had to show that they were ready to personalize their learning to move to the personalized section of the class.

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In my journal reflections I noted that during the team meetings each team member contributed to the discussion and provided input in the direction that was taken. Though individual contributions were diverse and not always in agreement, the group would discuss an issue until they had agreed on a way forward. Raelin (2016a) describes this as the democratic nature of the practice of leadership that “encourages the equal contribution and access of all engaged actors within the public forum” (p. 144). The path or the direction of the overall process was guided by varying members of the team as they engaged in the discussion. No one person waited on Denise to tell them how to solve the problems. They all engaged in an authentic spontaneous conversation where they freely exchanged their thoughts and shared their experiences, which in turn influenced the direction in which the decisions went. As I observed the team at work in their meetings, I noticed the effortless way in which they all owned the project and provided feedback that helped to guide the decisions that were made. The positional leader did not disappear in the meetings in which she participated, nor did she overpower these meetings. Instead insights and direction came from all parties who wanted to provide input in the direction of the initiative. Denise maintained the positional leader role as the team problem solved during their meeting, not as a boss telling the teachers what to do, but more as the “first among equals” (Wilkinson, Olin, Lund, Ahlberg & Nyvaller 2014, p.77). She opened up the space for teachers to provide their input on the matters being discussed, by facilitating the discussions through the initiation of the unleashing and inviting activities. Ultimately leadership happened in a democratic atmosphere as the team collectively responded to the challenges being experienced during the implementation of the project.

The team at Douglas engaged in what Woods and Roberts (2018) described as deep level collaboration characterized by “mutual support, a cohesive culture and sense of belonging and an embedded commitment to discussion and critical examination of pedagogy, educational aims and

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ways of enhancing teacher's practice" (p.5). This deep level collaboration resulted in a process of leadership that was shared during the implementation of the initiative as all the parties to the practice of leadership brought something to the table. The practice lens of leadership expands our understanding of leadership beyond what is done by the positional leader. This perspective also challenges the dyadic shared models of leadership that depicts followers as looking to the positional leader to be told what to do, by illustrating that the leadership activity happens organically and can emerge from any member of the team engaged in leadership work.

Socio-Material Impacts on Leadership as Practice

The second research question asked, "what factors in the socio-material environment appear to influence how leadership-as-practice is enacted within the school improvement initiative in one rural Saskatchewan school?" From my observations and through discussions with the participants at the Douglas school, the factors in the socio-material environment that appeared to influence how leadership-as-practice was enacted were: 1) The REORDER Framework; 2) A culture of trust; 3) resources that structured and supported information and/or processes and; 4) self and other awareness. These factors contributed to the flow and direction of the team meetings, and to the interaction of the team as they worked to meet the objectives of the initiative.

The nature of the initiative itself had some built-in components that enabled the collective leadership process to occur. One such component was the REORDER framework that was a division wide strategic implementation framework used to undergird the implementation of the learning philosophy. The elements of the REORDER framework assisted in shaping the actions of the team as they worked on the project. The strategic priority areas of the REORDER framework included [R]elationships, [E]nvironments, [O]pportunities [R]esources, [D]istribution

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of leadership [E] and [R]ecognition. The [R]elationships strategic priority speaks to the need for staff members to among other things maintain mentoring relationships to support each other and the students. This strategic priority was evidenced in the structural changes that were made in the implementation. One such structural change was the teachers moving from their individual classrooms to a collaborative space, where they each had a desk to work whenever they were not teaching or facilitating self-directed time. This common space facilitated the teachers checking in with each other regularly throughout the day, thereby increasing the level of collaboration among them. Another structural change came in the form of the teachers co-teaching Math and ELA, as well as co-facilitating self-directed time. These structural changes in the way the teachers worked saw them moving away from working with one set of students for the year to collectively being responsible for all the students. This also served to engender more collaboration among the staff, and by extension facilitated a collegial environment that enabled leadership as practice.

Another element of the REORDER framework that contributed to how leadership happened was the “distribution of leadership –we are learners that lead” component. Deliberate efforts were made to distribute leadership among the team. It should be noted that this distribution was organic in that it was not aligned with a leader-follower dichotomy, where the teachers waited on the leader to provide instructions of what needed to happen. Rather, team members were given room to identify challenges and take the required steps to address them within the confines of the project.

Clarke, Surgenor Imrich and Wells (2003) pointed out that rural schools are always seeking flexible approaches to meet student needs through “innovative and creative solutions” (p.13). Though a division wide initiative, the improvement project implemented at the school was a creative and innovative approach to ensuring that the students of the Douglas School were

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equipped with the tools needed to become 21st century learners through the personalized electronically blended learning model. The school, having learned from its brush with possible closure, became flexible and innovative in its pedagogical practices to ensure that it would remain viable. This flexibility likely contributed to the ways in which the teachers worked together, since most of the teachers had long histories of working with each other and were personally invested in the community. These strong ties likely contributed to the kind of culture that emanated in the school. There was an atmosphere of trust that existed among the teachers and the parents (community) that empowered them to take ownership of the initiative in the best interest of the students. This trust was built through the close connections between the parents and the teachers who have been serving in the school for more than 10 years. In other words, the number of years the teachers have worked in the school, and their prior relationships as community members, family members, parents and past students have forged bonds of trust and care. The trust between the teachers and the administrator also enabled an atmosphere in which the teachers were able to actively engage in the implementation of the initiative.

Several of the team members commented on the atmosphere of trust and accountability that existed within the environment that influenced the way in which the team worked. There was trust that existed between the parents and the teachers, who continually interacted with each other outside of the school space at community events. Parents used these informal gatherings to probe teachers about how the project was evolving. This informal connection with the parents in turn engendered a sense of accountability on the part of the teachers to ensure that everything was working smoothly as the parents and the students depended on them. This connection also speaks to the impact of the close-knit community of the school. Stemming from their vested interest in the project, the teachers displayed ownership of the project. Woods (2016) posits that

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a number of “capabilities and personal characteristics are important in influencing the degree to which people feel enabled and are prepared for being a contributor to leadership. These personal factors can include confidence, feelings of trust and respect motivating values that encourage participation” (p. 81). Trust was also brought to the fore in the relationship among the team members, where the teachers were encouraged to make decisions as they saw fit to further the implementation of the project. Understanding this context within which the project unfolded provides insight into the democratic structure within which leadership happened in the school. In commenting on the democratic roots of leadership-as-practice Woods (2016) explains that a context that is open and inclusive “encourages participation in leadership and testing of new ideas ...in which relationships involve a valuing of people as individuals for themselves and a sense of belonging, social equality flexibility, fluidity openness, respect, trust and mutually affirming relationships” (pg. 81) . The culture of trust that existed among the implementation team and between the teachers and the parents created a space for the team to authentically contribute to the leadership of the initiative.

As the team implemented the initiative there were several resources that assisted them in advancing the project. These resources served a structuring purpose as well as supported the flow of information among the team. Dahlia’s notes was one such resource that supported the collaborative atmosphere. The notes provided a starting point for the discussions that ensued as the teachers explored varying options to solve the challenges on the table. The notes usually captured the essence of the problem and offered possible solutions. These initial thoughts were interrogated collectively, and a way forward was decided on by the team. The second resource was One Note , an electronic binder that housed crucial project information, including schedules, lesson plans, a record of student behavior, and student grades. The electronic binder aided the

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collaborative leadership process by facilitating real time convenient access to the resources of the team from anywhere. The computer program allowed the team to have pertinent information for the project at their fingertips and facilitated continued collaboration beyond the team meetings, particularly as it related to the tracking of the activities of the students. A teacher could be at home and be able to access the meeting notes to make changes as needed that were immediately available to the other team members.

The personality test that the teachers had completed that provided them with insight into their personalities and how they dealt with change enabled the team to better work together and appreciate each other's perspectives. It also provided teachers a lens through which to examine their own behavior. Teachers were able to draw on their knowledge of their personalities as a way to depersonalize conflict and move beyond feelings of hurt or guilt. This public self-reflection opened the door for authentic communication and helped create a professional protocol for dealing with potential interpersonal conflict. This authentic communication enabled the teachers to successfully work with each other as they implemented the project. The team members' awareness of their personality types and that of their colleagues contributed to the ways in which they worked together to implement the project. This knowledge allowed them to be aware of how each other might react to challenges or opportunities, and minimized the possibilities of interpersonal conflict that would hinder the work. This then supported positive collaboration and helped to foster the implementation of the project.

The context within which the project unfolded contributed to how leadership-as-practicewas enacted. Raelin (2016a) explained that leadership “entails a dynamic interplay between individuals, social structures and different forms of materiality such as protocols, reports technologies and other artifacts” (p. 142). This dynamic interplay was evidenced at the

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Douglas school through Dahlia's document that operated as an ordering tool and One Note that served as a collaboration tool and facilitated real time access to organization resources needed to advance the initiative. The REORDER framework assisted in creating the atmosphere for collaborative relationships among the teachers, which was further supported by the culture of trust and respect that existed among the team and the wider community. Raelin (2018) points out that for collective leadership to work or be sustained, participants must keep an open mind to solicit everyone's diverse viewpoints through constructive dialogue. The parties need to continually work to earn each other's trust and cohesion while fostering creativity and timeliness" (p. 61). Douglas' collegial environment engendered by the small size of the school, the family atmosphere that existed and the length of time that the core team had worked together enabled or predisposed this group to approach leadership in a collective way.

Activities of the Practice of Leadership that Enable the Successful Implementation of a Rural School Improvement Initiative

The third research question asked, "How do the activities of leadership appear to enable the successful implementation of the rural school improvement initiative?" Raelin (2016b) categorized the activities of leadership in two groups. The first group of activities is referred to as 'the what of the practice' (p. 126). This group includes the designing, mobilizing, scanning, weaving and stabilizing activities. These activities speak to those functional actions that help to direct, and advance the work being done. The second group entails the socio-emotional component of the practice. These activities, inviting, unleashing and reflecting are required to "support and sustain the team while engaged together" (p.126). At the Douglas school the activities of leadership that were evidenced during the team meetings all played an important role

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in helping the team execute the requirements of the improvement project. Nonetheless, Table 6.1 demonstrates that some activities were evidenced more frequently than others.

Table 6.1

Evidence of the activities of leadership evidenced across the meetings observed

	Activities	Meeting A	Meeting B	Meeting C	Meeting D	Meeting E	Total
Socio-emotional component	Inviting	3				2	5
	Unleashing	2					2
	Reflecting	7	2	2	1	2	14
The “what” of practice	Scanning	2	2	1		2	7
	Weaving	1	1	1	1	1	5
	Designing	1	1	1		5	8
	Stabilizing	7	8		2	5	22
	Mobilizing	1	1	1			3
Total		24	15	6	4	17	

The socio-emotional activities were observed across all five meetings in varying degrees, with the reflecting activity being observed in all the meetings. Engaging in the reflecting activity allowed the team members to gain insight from each other’s current and previous actions and thoughts as they worked together to implement the project. With this in mind, Barnett and O’Mahony (2006) posit “that meaningful school improvement only thrives when a culture of reflection focusing on teaching and learning exists” (p. 159). The reflecting activity created a

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sense of connectedness and comradery that enabled the team members to recognize that they shared similar thoughts and feelings about the implementation of the project. This further strengthened the group dynamics of the team and advanced the direction of the project.

The inviting and unleashing activities were evidenced in two and one of the meetings respectively. The frequency of these activities could be attributed to the environment within which the team worked as well as the focus of the meetings. For instance, the unleashing activity was evidenced only in meeting A. This meeting was the first meeting that was held 3 weeks into the implementation of the project. The focus of the meeting was to have the team members share their thoughts on the successes and challenges with the implementation of the project thus far. The nature of the meeting was that of information gathering and sharing so that the team members could get an idea of what was working (successes), what was not working (challenges), and bring to the fore any issues that could impact the continued implementation of the initiative. This kind of information was particularly important as the team was getting ready to fully implement the initiative in another week. One unleashing activity was an attempt to encourage team members to share their challenges with the proviso that “this is a safe space” added to the request to share by Denise. In another instance a team member was encouraged to continue sharing her point with Denise saying, “no, please continue”. Denise further responded to her comment that she was just being honest by saying “please be honest.” The use of these encouraging and coaxing terms served to provide a comfortable space for the team member to freely share.

The inviting activity was evidenced in meeting A and meeting E. Again, given the nature of meeting A where persons were being encouraged to share, the inviting activity was a general call to the entire team to share their thoughts regarding challenges being faced and solutions

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sought, as well as successes in the implementation to date. As it relates to meeting E the occurrence of the invitation activity was in relation to having an usually quiet member of the team openly share whether she agreed with a suggestion that was being made, in the second instance the invitation activity was seen as a team member was asked to share which group of students the team should focus on first in their meeting.

Based on the interviews and my observations the teachers had been working with each other for many years, and generally felt able to freely share their views without being prompted. It therefore may have been less necessary to openly invite group members to share because the culture of the group was already a safe space where people felt free to share their views. Additionally, the members of the team believed in the value of the initiative and were internally committed to its implementation. They were keen to collectively play their part to make the initiative work for the benefit of students because of the deep commitment most of them had to the community and the families who lived there. Therefore, they were vested in the success of the initiative and were willing to share their thoughts on the project to date. Ultimately these socio-emotional activities assisted in supporting the group dynamics that enabled the team to successfully work together and effectively implement the project.

The stabilizing, scanning and designing activities were evidenced in four of the five meetings as seen in Table 6.1. The designing activity served to bring structure to the team. This structure was evidenced as the team members clarified task assignments agreed to in their meetings, resulting in an orderly and systematic implementation of the initiative. The stabilizing activity served to provide an anchor for the project. Through this activity feedback was provided that encouraged changes that had to be made to improve the way in which the project was being executed. For instance, as the team discussed the problem of students misusing the flexible

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seating option, several teachers provided feedback on how they handled the students who were abusing this option. Their feedback resulted in an understanding that if students were not using the seating arrangement responsibly then they should be assigned a seat and given another opportunity to demonstrate their ability to appropriately use the flexible seating option at another time. The frequency of the stabilizing activity speaks to the extent to which the team members were flexible in their approach to the implementation of the initiative. They were always looking for ways to make the project work to ensure that students were able to benefit from the changes that were made.

The scanning, mobilizing and weaving activities facilitated the identification of resources in the form of materials or strategies that could support the initiative. It is interesting that there were not more instances of weaving evidenced. This could be attributed to the newness of the initiative and the unique way in which the Douglas school was implementing the project. Given the newness of the initiative in the school division there were not many networks from which the team could draw. Additionally, the Douglas School's approach to the implementation was unique to its context. As such, team members created many of the resources they needed such as templates and lesson plans as they went along and wove them into the initiative where they made the most sense.

The activities of leadership-as-practicewere initiated by differing members of the team and arose organically as team members worked towards addressing the varying issues that impacted the successful implementation of the initiatives. These activities were interrelated and seamlessly flowed throughout the meetings, coming to the fore as needed while the team negotiated the way forward for the project. The activities of leadership-as-practicealso allowed the team to engage in what Argyris and Schön (1996) describe as double loop learning while

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they implemented the project. Robinson (2019) explains that double loop learning requires changes “to beliefs and values as well as actions” (p.20) which was evidenced in several of the problem-solving opportunities in which team members engaged during the meetings at the Douglas school. The reflecting and stabilizing activities of leadership practice in particular seemed to facilitate this type of learning at the individual and organization level.

The incident surrounding the misuse of the flexible seating arrangement by some students supports this claim. The issue of flexible seating came up while a teacher was reflecting on how the changes in students’ seating arrangements over the years relates to their inability to stay focussed in class and how this currently impacts the way students self-regulate in class. In response other teachers reflected on their experiences with how students self-regulated in relation to the flexible seating options and pointed out that while they were required to offer the option, it was not an entitlement for students. Teachers had the right to create seating arrangements until students could demonstrate that they were able to appropriately use the flexible seating options. The knowledge that flowed from the reflecting activity into a stabilization activity resulted in a structural change for the project, where it was decided that choosing a seating option for the student was within the purview of the teacher and would not violate the principles of the implementation framework of the improvement initiative. It should be noted that the desire to maintain the principles of the implementation framework, in this instance the creation of a flexible learning environment was at the core of the teacher’s concern about the flexible seating arrangement. Sometime after this meeting during a conversation with me, this teacher indicated that she had applied this approach with a group of students and was pleased with the results. Through the interaction among her peers she was provided with insight that enabled her to adjust the way in which she approached this aspect of the project. Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and

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Valentine (1999) contend that engaging in the process of double loop learning leads “not only to the acquisition and integration of new knowledge, but to the effective use and dissemination of professional knowledge” (p. 155). In this case drawing from the experience and knowledge of her colleagues, Carla was able to adjust her approach to the implementation of the initiative, and reap satisfactory results.

Conceptual and Methodological Reflections

In this inquiry, I sought to explore how leadership-as-practice was enacted during the implementation of a rural school improvement project. Given the premise that leadership is a socially constructed phenomenon, a qualitative methodology was chosen in order to access the lived experiences of the participants as they engaged in leadership work. I opted to use interviews, observations, and document analysis to enable me to get an understanding of the context within which the practice of leadership was being observed and to get close to the tacit taken for granted interaction of the participants. These data collection strategies were used to get close to the lived experience of the participants in this case study.

I approached this study with the set of activities that can be found in leadership-as-practice as advanced by Raelin (2016b). I observed several of these activities across the different meetings that I attended. I used the interviews to talk with the participants about what they were experiencing and doing during these meetings in an effort to come to an understanding of how they saw leadership-as-practice being enacted in their project meetings. Through the interviews these activities were alluded to by the participants, but given their tacit nature, the participants of the study were not readily able to articulate the process fully. Their articulated understanding of leadership was undergirded by the traditional understanding of leadership as being imbued in the formal leader of the school. As a result, there was an obvious tension in some of the interviews

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as the participants grappled with their role as major decision makers and influencers of the project implementation (collaborative leadership), and the activities in which the principal engaged. In order to delve deeper into the conceptualization of leadership as practice, it would have been useful to include a focus group with the participants deconstructing their own interactions using the activities advanced in Raelin's (2016b) framework. This approach would have provided another level of analysis that would have helped participants internalize the practice perspective of leadership.

It was very valuable to include the observations as a method for the study, as they allowed me to move past articulated conceptions (what we say) of the participants to the practice of leadership (what we do/how we do it) that existed in the school. Interviews alone could not have accessed this deeper level of understanding. The interview process was valuable, however, because it granted me the opportunity to meet individually with team members to reflect on what I observed in meetings, and to access individual perceptions of the collective process of leadership of the initiative. Individual fears and concerns related to change and the implementation process were evidenced, but so too was the authentic commitment of respondents to the overall vision of teaching, learning, innovation, and care for students. Document analysis was also valuable as I was able to learn how the local initiative fit into the divisional learning philosophy, as well as the priority areas of the implementation framework supported by REORDER. I was also able to determine the value of resource documents and/or software programming to the leadership process.

In hindsight, the engagement of the services of a professional transcriber might have alleviated some of the pressure that I felt with the reams of data that were collected. On the other hand, transcribing the interviews and meeting interactions myself allowed me to process and

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make notes (memos) about connections that I saw in the data along the way. Those memos proved to be quite useful as I went through the analysis and write up of the data.

While writing up my findings and analysis I recalled having a conversation with a professor who inquired how far along I was in the process. I indicated that I was putting together chapters four and five. The professor then replied, “That’s good. The discussion will write itself.” Unfortunately, this was not my experience. I found myself going back and forth through the findings to further refine my arguments for the discussion. Truly, the analysis process was iterative. Even while writing the discussion, ideas continued to flow. It was the memory of a piece of advice that was shared with me by my supervisor and a mentor that caused me to put a halt on the different directions in which my mind was going. In essence, they had said to me that this process would take me in multiple directions unless I could confine it. I had to create boundaries on the volume of data that I used to demonstrate evidence of my findings. With that in mind, I focused on a few of the major findings that answered the research questions and paused my compulsion to provide every instance of confirmation. My preoccupation with “being correct” also impacted me along the way. I had to come to the realization that the work I was doing was less about being right or wrong, and more about being able to support my claims with evidence from the data. This realization propelled me as I pulled together the final elements of this dissertation.

Implications for Research

In this study I have not attempted to provide any generalizations about rural school leadership and school improvement. Instead, I have shared the findings that have resulted in my exploration of how leadership-as-practicewas enacted in one rural school in Saskatchewan

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during the implementation of an improvement initiative. Several questions could be explored in the future:

- The historical, social, material and cultural underpinnings that were shaped by the rural context of this school appeared to influence the way in which the school actors worked as a team. Given Kempster, Parry and Jackson's assertion that no "two practices would be the same" (p. 243). It would be interesting to see how leadership-as-practicewould unfold in another rural school that did not have a similar historical, social, material and cultural underpinning. Which activities would be prevalent in the practice of leadership in another rural school, what could account for the differences and/or similarities in these schools? What factors, if any, in the social and material context contributed to how leadership happened in these spaces? Such a comparative study would provide further empirical knowledge about rural school leadership and school improvement beyond an understanding of what is done by the formal leaders (principals) in rural schools as they engage in school improvement initiatives. Additionally, this comparative study wou
- Another point of interest that could benefit from further study in a practice based inquiry of this nature is the connection between space materiality and rurality. This line of inquiry would facilitate an examination of how the practice of leadership may be influenced by the matetaility and spatial configuration of the rural school landscape. It may, for example, have something to offer in understanding the subtle differences between "small" schools versus "rural" schools that are often conflated in the literature.

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- Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010) in their study looking at the effect of collective leadership on teachers and students advanced that “collective leadership has a stronger influence on student achievement than individual leadership” (p. 19). In this study because of the short length of time that I was in the school, I was not able to ascertain the impact of the improvement initiative beyond the anecdotal evidence of success provided by the team and my observations of the students directing their learning. Further investigation into how the activities of leadership-as-practice influenced the overall success of the improvement project as it relates to improving student outcomes would provide further insight into the value of collective leadership and student outcomes in the rural school setting.
- An assessment of the ways in which the practice of leadership supported the sustainability of the initiative beyond the end of a school year would also provide useful information in the study of rural school leadership and improvement. Indeed, Harris (2003) pointed out that deep and sustained school improvement is reliant on collective leadership. Such a study would further add to our understanding of the relationship between collective leadership and sustained rural school improvement.
- My focus in this inquiry was limited to the interaction among the teaching staff. I looked to their interactions among other things to see how leadership unfolded as they implemented the improvement initiative. I did not look at the contribution of other school actors such as the School Community Council (comprised of parents) and the Student Leadership Team (comprised of students). It would be interesting to examine how these, and perhaps other, groups contributed to the leadership process as the improvement initiative unfolded in this rural school. In what ways, if any, did the

interaction between and among these groups and the teaching staff facilitate how the practice of leadership unfolded?

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results of this study have shown that leadership was shared during the implementation of the school improvement initiative at the Douglas School. Practically and from a policy perspective this finding has implications for the ways in which leadership development is conducted in a rural school. Currently leadership development tends to be approached from a one size fits all perspective targeted at the positional leader. Typically, the goal of leadership development results in the principal going to an off-site location removed from the context in which she or he works. Given the roles that the other actors at the Douglas School played in how leadership unfolded, as well as the contribution of the contextual factors that supported leadership, a more contextually responsive approach to collaborative leadership development should be considered. This study demonstrates that leadership development and enactment occur at the site of the leadership process and involves all actors who are involved in the practice of leadership. Although there is value in learning about the unique role of the principal and general leadership concepts and strategies, leadership development that is absent from context or is leader-centric is insufficient for supporting principals who work in the collective environment of a school. I am proposing that leadership development should become more context specific. This approach to leadership development would facilitate the development of all staff members, thereby further strengthening their capacity to effectively engage in the leadership processes of their school. This approach to leadership development could be accommodated during school and divisional professional development days and complement university programming. A

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collaborative approach to leadership development would more effectively create the conditions for learning about leadership as practice.

The collective nature of how leadership unfolded during the implementation of the improvement project has policy implications for the value placed on the important role of teachers in the implementation of rural school improvement initiatives. Accounts of rural school leadership and school improvement are leader-centric, outlining the actions and behaviors of principals as they facilitate the implementation of improvement initiatives. In this study, the teachers played an essential role in the implementation of the initiative and were actively engaged in providing direction for the project. It should be noted that the implementation of the initiative increased teacher workload, but also their commitment, as they organized resources to execute the project. Ultimately the practice perspective elucidates the vital role that teachers play in the leadership process and provides the means to capture this contribution that is often overlooked in leadership and school improvement studies.

This study also provides insight into the value of context in the implementation of school improvement initiatives. The Douglas school took a system initiative mandated by the school division and executed and adjusted it to meet the needs of the rural school and community context as needed. The REORDER framework helped to provide a sense of overall vision and structural direction, but did not hamper the local school in how it made the project work within its own rural context. This information would be particularly useful for school divisions engaged in the implementation of centralized school improvement initiatives, highlighting the importance of flexibility in the implementation of school improvement initiatives.

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The implementation of the Personalized Learning Initiative at the Douglas school was the latest iteration of the innovative responses to ensure that students were being prepared for 21st century learning. The improvement initiative brought with it an increase in collaboration among staff at the Douglas School. This finding is in keeping with Star and White's (2008) claim of an increase in collaboration among rural school actors due to structural reforms and limited resources in their study of rural Australian schools. The authors also pointed out that the increase in collaboration was aided by new technology. In the case of the Douglas School, technology played an integral role in the level of collaboration in which team members engaged with the use of One Note and One Drive. These computer programs were used as a means of keeping all members of the team up to date with real time activities. As the teachers were now engaged in co-teaching, this level of information sharing was required in an effort to ensure that they all had access to team resources in a timely fashion and were kept abreast of how the project was unfolding. This finding has practical significance for the value added that is provided through the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in supporting the ways in which rural school actors work. With this in mind there should be a sustained effort to continue the use of ICT in supporting the work of rural educators to foster greater collaboration within rural schools and across rural school divisions.

Finally, another contribution of this research lies in this study's empirical contribution to understanding rural school leadership and the leadership-as-practice research fields. As it relates to the leadership-as-practice model, this study responds to the call by Kempster, Parry and Jackson (2016) for a "stronger commitment to conducting empirical work despite its time-consuming expensive and uncertain nature rather than yet more conceptual critiques and polemic propositions" (p. 258). This is important given the value that the practice perspective of

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leadership provides in understating how leadership occurs beyond the skills and competencies of the positional leader. This understanding of leadership is particularly significant in a rural school setting where contextual factors such as the size of the school, the relationships between the school and the community, as well the historical and cultural influences shape how school actors engage in the leadership process. Preston and Barnes (2017), in their review of successful leadership in rural schools, called for additional research to be conducted that seeks to identify “characteristics, features, and traits needed to support and sustain a successful, collaborative leadership experience in a rural school” (p. 12). The findings of this study suggest that the rural context influenced the way in which the school functioned. The small size of the school, the close-knit school community consisting of parents who were once students at the school and members of the teaching staff who were also once students of the school and or currently have children attending the school, engendered a relational and trusting setting in the school. These intergenerational communal relationships supported a culture of trust between the teachers and the community of parents as well as among the teachers as they implemented the initiative. These factors supported the collaborative atmosphere within which leadership-as-practice unfolded in this rural school as the teachers took ownership of the initiative and collectively implemented the learning philosophy to positively impact student outcomes.

Final Reflections

In this study I attempted to understand the phenomenon of leadership in the dynamic context of a rural school as the school actors implemented an improvement initiative. When I reflect upon the highlights of this research journey, my mind goes back to the tensions that existed within me as my thinking evolved in the research process. Overcoming my own positivistic experience and taking on an interpretive frame required a mental shift of letting go of

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what I could not control and allowing the process to evolve. Additionally, I had to make a mental shift from my own leader-centric roots to fully embrace a more collaborative frame of leadership that accounts for the contribution of other actors involved in the leadership process. Being able to witness the school actors involved in the implementation of the project collectively making decisions that shaped the direction of the project was familiar to me in practice, but it was foreign to my theoretical and conceptual understanding.

I thoroughly enjoyed the data collection process. The teachers welcomed me into their school and shared with me their professional life as they engaged in a learning process themselves. There were moments of vulnerability as they engaged in real challenges that stretched their thinking and their relationships in their common desire to support their students as 21st Century learners. Interacting with teachers and watching the project unfold as the students personalized their learning was incredibly rewarding.

Prior to collecting the data, I had wondered whether I would find enough information to share the story of how leadership-as-practicewas enacted in this school. It turns out that I had so much information to transcribe and analyse that at times I felt overwhelmed by the process.

This journey has been a lesson in perseverance and letting go. I had to shed many of my preconceived ideas about leadership and the research process that were shaped by my own experience prior starting this study. At the end of this stage of my learning, I feel enriched by the mental and physical setbacks encountered along the way. I look back in appreciation of the lessons learned as I make a contribution to the body of literature on rural school leadership and school improvement.

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APPENDIX A - Interview Guide 1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to share your experiences about leadership during the implementation of your school improvement initiative. I am excited about this study and am privileged that you would agree to speak with me about your experiences. This interview will focus on the school context, the nature of the improvement initiative, your role in the initiative and your thoughts about leadership and its practice.

School Context

1. What is the grade configuration of this school?
2. What is the staff complement at this school?
3. Describe the culture of this school?
4. How long have you been with this school? What is your role?
5. What is unique (stands out) about this school?

Nature of Initiative

6. How long have you been with this school?
7. Why is this initiative being implemented?
8. What other types of initiatives have been implemented at this school?

Role of the Individual on the Team

9. What is your role in this improvement initiative?
10. What was your role in other improvement initiatives that have been implemented at this school?

Ideas about Leadership and its practice

11. How do you define leadership?
12. How does leadership work in this team?
13. How are decisions made in this team?

APPENDIX B - Interview Guide 2

Thank you for agreeing to share your experiences coming out of the recent planning meeting for your school's improvement project. Together we will be talking about how the practice of leadership was manifested during this meeting.

1. Who is/are the person/s in your meeting that provides information on where one can find resources to help in the implementation of your project? Describe how the person goes about doing this?
2. In your meeting who provides information from the past or other programs that is relevant to how you should proceed with your decisions as a team?
3. How are persons who are quiet in the meeting encouraged to get involved, or share their opinion?
4. During meetings how are persons encouraged to reflect on their action or the progress or activities being done during the implementation of the project.
5. How did you contribute to the decisions that were made in the just concluded meeting?
6. What was the response to project updates provided in the meeting?
7. How does the team use the information provided in these updates to make decisions, on moving forward with the project?
8. How did your teammates contribute to leadership in the just concluded meeting?
9. What artefact/s found in the last meeting do you believe contributed to the conduct of the meeting?
10. How do you think the (artefact name) contributed to the decisions that were made in the just concluded meeting?

APPENDIX C – Certificate of Approval



UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 09-Jul-2019

Certificate of Re-Approval

Application ID: 59

Principal Investigator: Tenneisha Nelson

Department: Department of Educational
Administration

Locations Where Research

Activities are Conducted: Rural school in the province of Saskatchewan, Canada

Student(s):

Funder(s):

Sponsor:

Title: Exploring Leadership as Practice in a Rural Saskatchewan School

Approved On: 06/07/2019

Expiry Date: 05/07/2020

Acknowledgment Of: N/A

Review Type: Delegated Review

* This study, inclusive of all previously approved documents, has been re-approved until the expiry date noted above

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 2014). The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <https://vpresearch.usask.ca/researchers/forms.php>.

Digitally Approved by Diane Martz, PhD
Chair - Behavioural Research Ethics Board
University of Saskatchewan

APPENDIX D – Participant Consent form

[Your department letterhead]

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled: Exploring Leadership-as-practice in a rural Saskatchewan school

Researcher: Tenneisha Nelson, Doctoral Candidate,

Department of Educational Administration,

Phone: 306-220-0573,

E-mail: t.nelson@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Dawn Wallin, Associate Dean,

Department of Educational Administration,

Phone: 306-966-7560,

E-mail: dawn.wallin@usask.ca

Purpose and Objective of the Research: The purpose of this naturalistic case study is to describe and analyze how leadership-as-practice unfolds during the implementation of a rural school improvement project in a K -12 school in Saskatchewan. The objective is to examine leadership as a collaborative process that is not only vested in the action and behavior of the positional leader of the school but involves all parties engaged in the leadership process as the project is being implemented. I am particularly interested in the leadership process in rural school settings because of the contextual challenges faced by rural schools, which force these schools to be innovative out of necessity.

Procedures: My intent is to observe your project meetings as you work to see firsthand how the process of leadership unfolds while you work along with your colleagues. The audio of these meetings will be recorded, as well as photos taken of the meeting space to capture how the space

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is used to support the leadership process. Therefore I am requesting your participation in at least two interview sessions lasting approximately one hour each. The interview questions for these sessions are designed to confirm or disconfirm observations that I would have made during the meetings, as well as to gather historical and contextual information about the project and your school. Additionally the photos will be used during the interview session for the sole purpose of stimulating reflection, and supporting memory recall (Patton, 2015). **The interviews will be recorded and you are free to request that the recording device be turned off at any time during the interview process. After your interview and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given an opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. The interviews will be recorded with an audiotape device. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.**

Potential Risks: There are foreseeable risks and discomforts associated with this study. The foreseeable risks include the potential for the breach in confidentiality. Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom may be known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion by limiting the length of quotes used in the final report.

Potential Benefits: The benefit to you personally is the possibility of your own thinking about leadership, and its development in rural schools, being stimulated. You will also be providing a service by contributing to the knowledge of rural school leadership that may help improve rural school leadership development. The new insights and understandings derived from the study may inform other researchers, by providing the information needed to support rural schools. These benefits are not guaranteed.

Confidentiality: Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information provided in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and the researcher will ensure not to disclose identifiable information.

The interview will be audio recorded. You may request the audio recorded to be turned off at any time during the interview. Audiotapes will only be used to transcribe the interview. After the

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interview, and prior to data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript to add, alter or delete information as you deem fit.

The data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interview, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information (such as the name of the institution) will be removed from our report.

There are several options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. You can choose all, some or none of them. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line(s) that grants me your permission to:"

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: ____ No: ____

I grant permission to be photographed: Yes: ____ No: ____

Storage of Data: The transcripts and research results will be password protected and coded with no identified information. The audiotapes, transcripts and research results will be safeguarded and securely stored for a minimum of five years post publication in a locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan in the office of my PhD supervisor. She and I will only have access to them. After five years, post-publication, have lapsed, the audiotapes and interview transcripts will be properly destroyed.

The consent forms and master lists of participants that include any identifiable information will be stored separately from the transcripts and audio recordings, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Your name will not be put on the transcripts or audio recordings. The consent forms and master lists will be stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's office and will be destroyed appropriately when data collection is completed and the information is no longer required.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort. The data you have given to that point will be deleted from the study. The data obtained from the interview will be used in an anonymous and confidential manner. After the transcription of the data into electronic format, the participant will

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view the data and sign a data release form. Your anonymity will not be compromised. The data from the research will be securely stored at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of 5 years. **Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply only until --- days after you have signed the data release form. After this, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.**

Follow up: To obtain results from the study, please email the principal investigator Tenneisha Nelson at t.nelson@usask.ca.

Questions or Concerns: You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study; please contact the researcher, Tenneisha Nelson at 306-220-0507 or by email at t.nelson@usask.ca.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

Consent Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	
<i>Researcher's Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>	

A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

APPENDIX E – Observation Protocol

Length of Activity: _____	
Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
How is the activity of signalling evidenced in this meeting?	
How are decisions made in this meeting?	
How is the activity of weaving evidenced in this meeting?	
How is the activity of inviting evidenced in this meeting?	
How is the activity of reflecting evidenced in the meeting?	

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What role do artefacts play in the making of the decision in this meeting?	
--	--

(Source: Adopted from Creswell 2007, p. 137)

APPENDIX F – Transcript Release form

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview (s) in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Tenneisha Nelson. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Tenneisha Nelson to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

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APPENDIX G – Douglas School’s Learning Outcomes Map



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