PERCEPTIONS OF A K-12 PRINCIPAL WITH COLLABORATION ALONGSIDE TEACHERS

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I dedicate this work to my family,

especially my husband Donald and

my girls Stephanie, Ariel and Danielle.

Your patience through this process has been appreciated.

Without your support I would not have made it to completion.

To you all, I am eternally grateful.

With much love … 'always'

Abstract

In this qualitative research project, which is guided by narrative inquiry, I seek to better understand the collaborative experiences of one kindergarten to grade twelve school principal who works alongside teachers. Supporting teachers and teacher growth is an important task that is in the portfolio of many school-based administrators. Focus often tends to be on supervision and evaluation of teachers, however there is a role for school-based administrators to support collaboration amongst teachers and engage in collaboration alongside teachers. By reflecting on, and inquiring into, the experiences of a principal working collaboratively alongside teachers through their own teaching and administrative experiences, I will share several themes that emerged from this narrative research inquiry.

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Arriving at this Research

I began my career in the early 2000's in a small, rural school. Many of the teachers I worked with were veteran teachers; however, there was one teacher starting her career at the same time as me. We worked closely together in many areas, however our teaching assignments were dramatically different, and so we mostly became moral support for one another. Teachers did not work together. Many operated in silos, as the only teacher of the grades they taught. They kept to themselves. It was much as if they were the only teachers in the building. Despite the fact that the school purchased resources for subjects, those teachers became the keeper of those resources and were reluctant to share with anyone else. It was akin to bankers keeping treasures in vaults. It was an incredibly isolating experience. I had left the support of my university student teaching experiences expecting to walk into a supportive culture and was shocked to find out this was not the case. Even the principal kept to himself. He was an enigma, locked away in his office, emerging only to deal with discipline issues or staff meetings. He came into my classroom very few times, and all of his visits were connected to the standard evaluation that all first year teachers experienced to determine contract status. Feedback was minimal, conversation was limited, and he offered little in the way of feedback for how to improve my practice. If it was not for the other first year teacher sharing my journey, I am not sure that I would have continued.

After several years in that division, I chose to relocate to a different division, also rural but closer to my hometown. When I started teaching there, the school was working through the former Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), and their focus was on assessment. There was a lead teacher in the school whose responsibility it was to attend meetings and seminars about assessment and bring that learning back to share with the teachers in our school.

Teachers worked together, however it was not a true form of collaboration. I would consider it rather superficial in the sense that the ideas were shared and we had discussions, however we all were teaching multi-grade classes, so we took our information back to our individual classrooms and "figured it out" from there. At times, we would come back to one another and have a professional conversation about what we did and what we might do differently, however, there was nothing scheduled and not a large sense of accountability to ensure that we did follow through with incorporating change into our practice.

As time went by, we started to embrace collaboration in a different way. We would work on something together that would help improve our practice, take it back to our classrooms, and then meet again at a prearranged time to discuss what we did and how it worked. We would not have formally called ourselves a learning community; we would have considered ourselves to be "talking about what we were doing." There was little support or involvement with administration at this time. The administrators' role, as it appeared to me, would have been to tell us that we needed to work on assessment and then disappear. Every so often, he may ask if we were still doing it, but not ask specifically about what we were doing and learning and how that may be affecting our practice and our students. The role of the principal was certainly removed and almost more that of manager than colleague.

I moved into administration mid-way through the school year, taking over from the current administrator who went on leave. As a result, I was still actively teaching a large portion of the day. I also maintained strong connections with the other teachers within the school. When we participated in professional development, I was alongside them. We started to form goals together and have conversations that involved improving practice, working to set goals for our students, despite the fact that we all taught separate grades. We worked together in a way that I

had never before experienced. While we still had not called ourselves collaboration groups at that time, we were certainly collaborating. I was a teacher who had experienced isolation amongst both colleagues and administration, so it was very different to be the teacher colleague but also hold the title of principal. I understood what teachers needed, and what support they might want from administration because I was one of the teachers, because we talked about what we wanted and needed. I really began to understand how critical the role of the principal was in successful collaboration.

These early experiences in both my teaching and administrative careers have stayed with me. My experiences may be somewhat typical of other teachers starting their career at the same time as me, in terms of experiencing little collaboration early in my career and experiencing an evolution of engagement with colleagues. I feel fortunate to have moved into administration in the way that I did. Working with my teaching colleagues, with whom I had long established, strong relationships was, in my belief, beneficial as I was able to experience what the teachers were experiencing while gaining an appreciation for the complexities of administration. Throughout my own personal journey as an administrator, I have come to value collaborating alongside teachers. I feel that in order for me to appreciate what teachers are being asked to do, I have a role in learning alongside them and, as much as possible, supporting collaboration. I do not want to micromanage teachers or dictate what collaborative practice should look like, yet I do feel I have a role in supporting their collaborative work. In arriving at my research, I wanted to hear the stories of another school principal of collaboration alongside teachers. I wondered what I might be able to learn from someone else's experiences in order to become a better administrator.

My research question was "What are the experiences of one school principal of collaboration alongside teachers?" Baum and Krulwich (2017) stated that, "true collaboration – the kind that makes adults significantly better at their jobs – happens only when professionals collaborate … on the *defining work* of their profession, striving collectively to make that work the best it can be" (p. 63). Baum and Krulwich also highlighted the importance of the collaborative process being directed by a strong school leader who has demonstrated excellence in the work being undertaken. DuFour (2004) suggested there needs to be a "simple shift – from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning" (p. 8) for teachers to grow as professionals. My personal experiences as an educator and an administrator lead me to striving to more deeply understand and explore the role that an administrator plays when supporting collaboration with teachers. Through this research, my hope was to gain a better understanding of one principals' experiences and perceptions of both the role of, and value in, collaboration of principals alongside teachers.

Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to provide a deeper look at how collaboration benefits teachers, specifically when school administrators are able to engage in collaboration alongside teachers. Administrators are in a strategic position to provide support to teachers which, in turn, can benefit student learning. My hope is that, through the research, insights will emerge about how to encourage and support collaboration between teachers and administrators, while jointly allowing for the improvement of pedagogical practice.

It is my belief that collaboration can be an important part of learning for teachers and administrators, with the ultimate goal of improving student learning. For student success, "the

quality of teaching makes all the difference" (Hattie, 2012, p. 169). In order to positively shape the quality of teaching within a school, it is of critical importance that the school principal be an engaged participant in ensuring that teachers are able to cultivate their skills. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated that "developing collaborative cultures is careful and precise work and has profound impact when carried out well" (p. 13). Brookhart and Moss (2014) identified that while the principal is the principal learner, they are "not the dispenser of all education wisdom" (Brookhart & Moss, 2015, p. 27). Thus, a critical role of the principal here is to encourage the establishment of trust within the community through positive interactions and by modeling what trust looks like within that community (Bouchamma & Brie, 2014).

Through multiple interviews and conversations with my participant, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how administrators can better support teacher growth through collaboration. These understandings could be shared with other administrators and teachers to encourage more collaborative relationships. I hoped that, through working with my participant, I will be able to share insights for supporting collaboration alongside teachers as well as identify some potential areas to avoid. DuFour and Mattos (2013) put forth that "the key to improved student learning is to ensure more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time" (p. 37). A way to ensure that more good teaching happens is to allow teachers (and administrators) an opportunity to work together in a collaborative model that builds the responsibility of each teacher (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

Another goal of this research was to provide a platform for the participant to have the opportunity and space to share their experiences, wisdom, and perceptions of the value of collaboration alongside teachers. Participation could potentially assist in identifying areas for improvement in collaborative practice with teachers and/or administrator colleagues. A final aim

for this research project would be to help improve my own administrative practices when collaborating alongside teachers and to be able to share that with my administrative colleagues.

Related Literature

Teachers are working in a world that is constantly changing. Therefore, teachers must also be willing to make changes to their own pedagogy in order to benefit student learning outcomes (Seifert, 2016). Change can be challenging for many, and educators are no exception. It becomes imperative that school administrators understand not only the changes that may need to occur in their schools, but also how to best support teacher growth so that it has a positive impact on student learning. DuFour and Mattos (2013), Brookhart and Moss (2015), and Hattie (2012), amongst others, support research that suggests, "that teacher quality is one of the most significant factors in student learning" (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 34). As such, one could surmise that the role of the administrator in ensuring high quality teachers are in classrooms alongside students is of significant importance. For administrators, this could include supporting teachers through supervision (Benigno, 2016; Mette, Range, Anderson, Hvidston, Nieuwenhuizen & Doty, 2017; Mette, Range, Anderson, Hvidston, & Nieuwenhuizen, 2015), coaching (Brookhart & Moss, 2015; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Habegger & Hodanbosi, 2011; Lia, 2016; Nidus & Sadder, 2011), or a combination of both. However, it could be suggested that providing opportunities to work collaboratively with teachers to encourage reflection, engagement, and collegial conversations would be highly beneficial to improving teacher pedagogy. As a result, administrators would be actively engaged with teachers to ensure that students are receiving the highest quality of teaching possible.

Administrators have a responsibility to learn alongside teachers and support curriculum implementation at all levels. Bouchamma and Brie (2014) suggested that in order to be deemed as ethical, the leader must act in a way that promotes learning within the community. Integral to modeling the behavior of the group, the leader must be engaged in actively learning alongside teachers (Bouchamma & Brie, 2014). By showing this vulnerability and not being the expert of all, the principal is able to gain credibility with staff and create the sentiment that they too are embedded in learning alongside teachers.

In their narrative inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) shared the story of "Stephanie," a teacher within a challenging school that is about to go through an administrative change. At the start of the narrative inquiry, observations made by Clandinin and Connelly include views from colleagues that were less than flattering of Stephanie's teaching style, management approach, and classroom environment. They go on to include that the "stories of the school … [portrayed the school] as a racially mixed school, a racially troubled school, a school of poor achievement" (p. 25). As their narrative inquiry develops, there is a change in administration that has a change in how Stephanie is viewed as an educator. She "began to be seen as an important, knowledgeable person" (p. 26) within the school. The power of administration supported this shift in how Stephanie was seen and allowed her to become a leader within her own school. The belief in the educators the administrator was working with was critical to changing how curriculum was engaged with in the school.

When administration is able to engage with teachers within the school, a shift in culture can emerge. A shift in administration can be positive or negative (Barnett, 2018; Berkowitz, Iachini, Moore, Capp, Astor, Pitner, & Benbenishty, 2017; Brookhart & Moss, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Vidal & Paulilo, 2019) and in this situation, it was a positive shift for both the

teacher and the school. A role of administration would be to create an atmosphere and environment that supports and encourages growth. Brookhart and Moss (2014) identified that while the principal is the principle learner they are "not the dispenser of all education wisdom" (p. 27). In this way, administration can allow growth within a staff to occur.

Much has been written about the importance of supervision, coaching, collaboration, and feedback in encouraging teacher growth. Echoing Marzano (2012) and Miekle and Frontier (2012), Brookhart and Moss (2015) noted that "the purpose for giving formative feedback to teachers is to support their development as effective educators'" (p. 24). Feedback to teachers is best done in a collegial conversation in a climate that is supportive of continuous learning (Brookhart & Moss, 2015), consequently allowing for the development of a culture of learning.

Another benefit to collaboration is the positive impact on student achievement. DuFour and Mattos (2013), Brookhart and Moss (2015), and Hattie (2012), amongst others, support research that suggests that "teacher quality is one of the most significant factors in student learning" (DuFour & Mattos, 2013, p. 34). The creation of a collaborative learning environment in a school helps to have a positive impact on teacher growth as well as a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Bouchamma & Brie, 2014). DuFour and Mattos (2013) suggested that "the most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning, however, is not by micromanaging instruction but by creating the collaborative culture and collective responsibility" (p. 37). Ultimately, teachers have the opportunity to be responsive to the needs of their students as well as their own learning by participating in professional learning communities (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

DuFour and Mattos (2013) indicated that the best way to improve student learning and thus teacher practice is to "focus on the collective analysis of evidence of student learning" (p. 37). To support this partnership, they suggested the creations of professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs allow teachers with time embedded into the workday to collaborate and together seek ways to improve their practice to better support student achievement (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). This process involves teachers and can engage administrators by providing guidance and direction. Teachers are able to have an active voice in where they want to make pedagogical improvements while being encouraged to share that vision with their administration (Brookhart & Moss, 2015). In turn, administration is able to support teachers by observing practice and engaging in collegial conversation with those educators to boost their growth (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Together, teachers and administrators can examine evidence of student work on an ongoing basis, look for trends and patterns, and discuss avenues for enhancement to improve learning outcomes (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). This would be one of the ultimate goals of collaboration between teachers; and it allows the school administrator the opportunity to work alongside teachers towards the same goal.

A critical role of the principal is to encourage the establishment of trust within the community through positive interactions and by modeling what trust looks like within that community (Bouchamma & Brie, 2014). Tschannen-Moran (2017) examined the importance of trusting relationships in schools, stating that it is "fundamental to their core mission of educating students" (p. 1). Trust is built up over time and comes about because of an interdependence between people (Tschannen-Moran, 2017). When looking at supporting educators, whether it is through coaching, collaboration, observation, formative feedback, or other methods, it is important to understand how trust between educators is developed. Tschannen-Moran (2017)

asserted, "to trust another person or group is to be at ease, without anxiety or worry, in a situation of interdependence in which valued outcomes depend upon the participation and contribution of others" (p. 2). Tschannen-Moran, in her research paper examining the importance of trust within the education setting, observed that in order for educators to be willing to make changes, the trust level must be strong and based on honesty, openness, reliability, benevolence, and competence. If trust is not authentic and these elements are missing, it may make it challenging for educators to embrace feedback, coaching, or engage with colleagues, as they may not feel comfortable taking risks (Tschannen-Moran, 2017).

Other literature suggests that the current model of teacher supervision is one that can be wrought with fear and intimidation, as the process can be formal, based in policy, and end in judgements about employment (Mette et al., 2017). While there is a need for supervision to have a formal element, there must also be the provision to allow for support to be offered (Mette et al., 2017). The work of Bouchamma and Brie (2014) would continue to support the importance of establishing a relationship of trust within the collaborative culture of the school. In supporting teachers, administrators must work to develop a trusting relationship where both parties can be open and honest, while providing constructive coaching (Mette et al., 2017). In order to do this, principals must work with teachers to target specific areas for student improvement that leads to determining possible avenues for teacher development, including professional growth opportunities (Mette et al., 2017). Finding a balance between administrator-directed professional learning and teacher-directed professional learning can be a challenge; however, there is value to teachers driving this learning and principals working alongside teachers (DuFour, 2004).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have traditionally focused on face-to-face interactions of professionals to enhance their practice. Increasingly, however, people are working

in a variety of areas to improve their professional engagements, and this includes the Internet.

Through cloud-based technologies, educators are finding social networks "characterized as a

meeting place where collective knowledge is created by the users in a collective, equalitarian

manner, aiming to distribute knowledge [creating] a dynamic reality of collaborative learning

among different people who mutually interact through the network" (Seifert, 2016, p. 32). These

social networks, as defined by Seifert (2016), "facilitate activities that promote involvement,

collaboration and engagement" (p. 31) which have the opportunity to deeply enrich the activities,

culture, and learning outcomes in a school for students, educators, parents, and even the

community. According to Seifert (2016), social networks are a place where collective knowledge

is gathered, created, and shared with other people within the network for the ultimate benefit of

the system. Seifert (2016) cited Poore in clarifying that social networks "which influence

learning include: participation, collaboration, interactivity, communication, community building,

sharing, networking, creativity, distribution and personal suitability" (p. 32). A positive result of

the social network, according to Seifert (2016), is that new relationships are created within the

network as well as existing relationships strengthened because of the collaborative work of

people working towards similar goals.

Powell and Kalina (2009) credit developmental psychologist Jean Piaget as focusing on

"constructivism [that] has to do with the individual and how the individual constructs

knowledge" (p. 242). They cited Piaget when stating that "humans cannot be given information,

which they immediately understand and use; instead, humans must construct their own

knowledge" (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 242). This lends itself to the importance of social

networks having time to engage with the work that they are doing in order to make sense of the

learning. These authors argued, "Piaget's cognitive constructivism theory incorporates the

importance of understanding what each individual needs to get knowledge and learn at his or her own pace" (p. 243). This reinforces that people need an opportunity to hear what is to be learned, make sense of it in their context, connect it to prior knowledge, and ultimately apply it to the goals of the group (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Seifert (2016) discussed the power of social networks as a place of learning and collaboration. This theory is supported by Powell and Kalina (2009) as they explore "social constructivism [as] a highly effective method of teaching that all students can benefit from, since collaboration and social interaction are incorporated" (p. 243). This supports the work of social networks to advance learning for the participants, whether they be child or adult. Powell and Kalina (2009) also examined the work of Lev Vygotsky, who considered social interactions amongst participants as crucial to learning. Vygotsky discussed the zone of proximal development (ZPD) "as a zone where learning occurs when a child is helped in learning a concept in the classroom" (as cited in Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 244), while utilizing cooperation and scaffolding to assist students in learning how to solve problems. Working in the ZPD and using scaffolding supports the work of social networks, like PLCs, whether it be with a group of students, educators, or community members. The goal is similar, and the group can work together to support each other collaboratively and cooperatively to solve problems.

DuFour and Mattos (2013) forwarded the idea that "the key to improved student learning is to ensure more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time" (p. 37). The way to ensure that good teaching happens is to allow teachers an opportunity to work together in a collaborative model that builds the responsibility of each teacher (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). DuFour and Mattos argued that for a PLC to be effective, the focus must be on improving pedagogy via focusing on improving student learning by utilizing key elements. According to

their research, these key elements include teachers taking mutual accountability for student learning, sharing pedagogical methods that focus on continual student progress, collecting data, being transparent with the results, actively engaging in professional development, and collaboration time. DuFour and Mattos observed that the principal plays a vital role in supporting the development of strong PLCs and that "the most vital support a principal can give these collaborative teams is helping them use evidence of student learning to improve their teaching" (p. 38).

The role of principals in establishing and supporting social networks varies. The coaching models shared by Lia (2016) and Brookhart and Moss (2015) each explores different models of support. Lia (2016) argued that the role of the principal in an external coaching model is limited when interacting with teachers. Rather, Lia suggested that the principal offer time for an external coach to come in. In this model, the coach might provide some feedback to the principal, however, the bulk of the communication and coordination takes place directly between the teacher being coached and the coach. The belief is that this method will eliminate the challenge of feedback provided by someone's direct supervisor and the potential implications for job retention or security (Lia, 2016). Conversely, Brookhart and Moss (2015) shared a model of coaching that is a collaborative approach between a principal and a teacher with a trusting relationship built on honesty, professionalism, and mutual respect. This model enables teachers and administrators to work together on improving teacher practice, and progress is dependent upon this relationship.

The role of principals in these two models, then, is distinctly different. In one, the principal is more of a bystander to the progress, where the other is contingent upon the direct support and involvement of principals to ensure that teacher learning is moving forward. Both of

these models utilize a small social network built between two people, the coach or administrator and the teacher. Interactions are direct, intended to be supportive and to move the pedagogical practices of the teacher forward, while improving student learning in the classroom. Further supporting the individual coaching model, Habegger and Hodanbosi (2011) stated that in order for a coaching model to be successful and effective, "principals must give teachers time to collaborate, learn new instructional strategies and tools, and function as a professional learning community" (p. 37), ultimately embedding this coaching time into the school day.

Personally, I prefer the model presented by Brookhart and Moss (2015) where the principal has a collaborative and collegial relationship with teachers. I feel that it is important for principals to have strong relationships with teachers and to have a solid understanding of the day-to-day work that teachers are doing. I believe that this preference comes from my experiences with working alongside teachers, supporting them in the work they do. By learning and working alongside teachers to collaborate and support growth, I believe that, as a principal, I am able to play a more authentic role that has been built through trust. It also, in my experience, allows me more credibility because I see the reality and am an active participant in the work. I do, however, agree with Habegger and Hodanbosi (2011) in that allowing teachers time within the school day, whenever possible, is key to creating conditions for collaboration to be successful. I believe that finding ways to create this collaborative time demonstrates the importance of working together without it being something else that is added to the already full plates of teachers. There is a delicate balance that must be found. However, with the administrator working alongside teachers, my belief is there is more likely to be support and success in collaborative efforts.

Research Strategies/Methods

This narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) allowed for deep engagement with one participant around their personal and professional experiences with collaboration. Guided by narrative inquiry methodology, I inquired into the stories of experiences of one K-12 school administrator in a rural school setting in north central Alberta. Via purposeful sampling, I invited Ella, an administrator with more than five years of experience as both a teacher and administrator within a K-12 school setting, to share her experiences of collaboration over the course of her career. I used the attached institutional ethics-approved information and consent letter (see Appendix A).

In order to find a research participant, I used purposeful sampling, which is defined by Creswell (2012) as "intentionally select[ing] individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (p. 206). Ella is an administrator who has a rich history working as both a teacher and administrator at more than one school site, which I believe added depth to her stories. Ella has more than thirty years of experience in schools. Over the course of her career, she has been a classroom teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, a mentor, and an instructional coach. Ella has an enthusiastic passion for education that is evident in the many areas she has worked. As a mother, she understands the importance of educators who genuinely care about the work they do, and she models this in her interactions with colleagues, parents, and students. Ella has been a mentor to many teachers and administrators over the course of her career. She has volunteered in a number of capacities within her school, community, with the Alberta Teachers' Association, and other organizations. She has a passion for professional development, and personal and professional growth. This enthusiasm has led her to lead professional learning experiences for teachers within her school and district, as well as throughout the province of Alberta and internationally. Her varied experiences have helped

shape her into an excellent administrator who is a role model to many. The student population at her school is approximately 300 students, offering a kindergarten to grade twelve program with approximately 15 full-time professional teaching staff as well as approximately 20 educational assistants, support staff, administrative assistants, and custodial staff. The school is part of a geographically large school division, where the rural location of each school contributes to small school sizes that are at a considerable distance from one another.

I collected data over three separate research conversations between January 2020 and February 2020. Using open-ended questions to facilitate dialogue (see Appendix B), one-on-one research conversations that lasted approximately one hour in length were conducted and recorded. Field notes and transcriptions helped to support reflection during and after our conversations. After the first research conversation was completed, I transcribed the conversation and then reviewed the transcription to ensure accuracy. Utilizing the transcription, I was able to begin to recognize the emergence of some narrative threads. Using these threads, I was able to identify areas needing further elaboration at our next research conversation, as well as some follow-up questions. At our second research conversation, I reviewed with Ella our first research conversation by identifying some of the themes that emerged. I asked Ella if she felt satisfied that this was accurate, as well as if there were any areas that she wished to elaborate on. After this, I was able to proceed with asking additional questions and let the dialogue develop again. A similar process was followed after the second research conversation and to establish the framework for the third and final research conversation, where themes from the two previous research conversations were able to be identified and discussed. In this way, throughout the research process, I engaged in member-checking (Creswell, 2012) by discussing my analysis with Ella to ensure my understanding and representation of her experiences were accurate.

Throughout this process, data was analyzed to identify narrative threads (themes) that linked Ella's experiences with collaboration.

The Shape of the Data: Narrative Threads

As we began our research conversations, Ella stated very early that collaboration, as we know it today in the world of education, did not exist at the start of her career. She stated that at the start of her principalship over ten years ago, "collaboration didn't even seem to be a thing that happened" and that teachers worked primarily in isolation where "you just had to figure it out on your own and now it's not like that." Lessons, assessments, units, and even professional development was done with everyone "doing their own thing." As our conversations developed, Ella repeatedly expressed how much collaboration has evolved and how beneficial she feels this evolution has been to individual educators and the profession as a whole: "It is really terrific when you see teachers that are actually sitting down together with the Program of Studies or an assessment piece they are working on to make it a stronger tool to use in their classrooms."

As we continued delving into Ella's experiences of collaboration over time, six key threads were continuously woven across all three of our research conversations. Narrative threads were identified as themes that continuously emerged in all three interviews, often generating further dialogue about the importance of those concepts. Many of the threads that emerged were intertwined with each other. These threads included: Relationships and trust, the role of the principal, growth as a result of collaboration, the use of data within collaboration, the importance of time, and the need to share. While many other important topics were discussed, these six threads resonated most across our discussions and narrative inquiry process. These threads are explored in the following subsections.

Relationships and Trust

The importance of relationships and trust was established early on and emerged as the strongest thread in this narrative inquiry. When asked what a key piece of advice to a new administrator looking to collaborate with teachers might be, Ella identified that it would be to establish strong relationships within the school and between herself and the teachers, otherwise "growth and collaboration would be very difficult." Ella highlighted that relationships between teachers and teachers as well as teachers and administration is critical to the success of any collaboration, stressing that "I keep coming back to relationship and trust. If you don't have that trust piece, I don't think it's [collaboration] going to be a very successful practice." We discussed how when teachers trust their administrators, they feel more comfortable taking a risk, being vulnerable, and embracing collaboration. Ella felt that this could be said for teachers who are at the beginning stages of their career, as well as teachers who are considered to be more veteran. Relationships built on trust allow for comfort to develop because if "teachers feel more able to take a risk when they know they have the trust of their administration … and that means they can fail and it will be okay too." Ella identified that, as an administrator, she wants teachers to feel comfortable taking a risk because sometimes it works out and there is success, but if it does not, it opens the door to discussions on improvement. This is reinforced with her statement that "if I had to pick something that is most important … relationships and trust would be really quintessential in making sure that [collaboration] is successful."

The Role of the Principal

Ella was clear that the principal is an integral part of collaboration within a school and that "if the principal is not seen to be supportive and engaged then collaboration would be

unlikely to be successful, at least not in the way that one might hope it to become." For Ella, the principal could hold a variety of roles within the umbrella of supporting teacher collaboration. She identified that "one of the hardest things for me, as the principal collaborating with teachers is to not try to fix everything all at once … but instead to ask questions to help teachers go deeper." Ella felt that her role as a principal is to help teachers identify key areas for collaboration without being directive, otherwise they would not be able to develop their own direction.

The principal can be "engaged alongside teachers learning with them" which helps to build trust, but they also have a role in ensuring that "teachers have time to collaborate with one another so that it does not become an add-on." Ella expressed that this could mean, "taking whole groups of students to provide teachers time in the day to gather and work together." She believes that the role of the principal is to also help find research or other data that may support the collaborative work that is being undertaken. The principal should be seen as "paving the pathway for success … a principal [should] look at ways to eliminate some of the barriers they may face making their job just a little bit easier." Finally, for Ella, the principal has a responsibility in helping to set the direction of collaboration. Through "modeling the importance of collaboration within the school" and helping to create time, space, support, and work at "creating a trusting relationship," the principal becomes a "key player in the collaborative efforts between teachers and teachers and principal and teachers." Without this support, "collaboration may not be successful because the teachers do not see the principal as valuing collaboration."

To support collaboration alongside administrators, Ella identified that there "needs to be a balance" between how much time administration spends with teachers and how much time teachers have to lead on their own: "As a principal, I can't always be at every collaboration

session but I still pop in and support when needed. I go to see the progress, work alongside, and see how I can help." There needs to be the ability to give teachers "autonomy to work together but still have set expectations" to ensure there is accountability. Ella believes that the principal plays a critical role in the success of teacher collaboration, but that it varies depending on the situation.

Growth as a Result of Collaboration

Ella shared her belief that growth can and does occur as a result of collaboration. She felt that this growth certainly impacts teachers and administrators, but filters down to students. When teachers and administrators are collaborating, it is "better for student outcomes because teachers are learning more" and improving their pedagogy. Ella stressed that it is important to remember that change does not always have to be grandiose. Because, for some, "change is hard. We expect a lot, too much, and it overwhelms teachers … break it down to small stages, work with them at it and remind them of past success."

Ella talked about how when people feel supported, the learning starts to emerge as a "ripple effect" that has an impact on everyone. She noted that when

> that administrator and those … teachers [are] working alongside one another, you have that whole triangulation piece of teacher to teacher, teacher to administrator, teacher to other teachers. They are building and improving their practice and ultimately that benefits the students. You just keep rolling down the wave of [benefits from] administrator to teacher and then to student.

Ella believes that for growth to occur in teachers, the principal who is collaborating alongside the teachers must be a supporter. This ties back to the earlier mentioned threads of relationship and trust, as well as the role of the principal. When the principal exhibits a sense of trust and faith in the ability of the teachers, while supporting the direction and not micromanaging, "this becomes a worthwhile endeavor because growth will happen, even if success is not immediate."

The Use of Data within Collaboration

Data was identified as an important part of the collaboration process. However, Ella stated that "data does not have to be numbers" and standardized tests: "Data can be your observations, a collection of the anecdotal." Ella felt that the purpose of data in relation to collaboration should be used to inform where to focus time and energy, but a way to monitor progress. Within that, she felt that "when you're trying something not everything can be measured by a test." She proceeded to provide the example that

> if you're going to be tweaking how you do your unit plans, that's not going to be measured by a test that the kids do after. It can be by how you feel in terms of your confidence as a teacher, that you've made some progress as a teacher.

In this process, teachers will identify that they have made growth based on understanding how well they met certain objectives within the Alberta Education Program of Studies, which is the mandated curriculum for K-12 education in Alberta, or by how well students engaged in activities. These cannot, according to Ella, be measured by test results alone. Data plays a role in helping to identify success, continued areas for growth, and should be an important part of informed collaboration.

The Importance of Time

Another area identified by Ella that she felt was critical to the success of school-based collaboration alongside teachers is the concept of time. She felt strongly that

teachers already have a lot on their plates so we have to be careful what we add on. If we say collaboration is important, if we decide as a school that it is a priority, as an administrator, I have to find that time in the school day for teachers to collaborate … teachers, their time is valuable so they want to make sure that they capitalize on that time that they [do] have.

Ella said that this can be a challenge. Administrators are responsible for adhering to the regulations that govern a teacher's assignable time in the collective agreement. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2017) defines an assignable time clause as "assignable time clause limits teachers' time in the class or limits time spent in performing assignable duties. Assigned time includes instruction and any other tasks teachers perform at the direction of administrators and/or boards such as supervision, PD and staff meetings". In Alberta, the assignable time allowed to teachers is 1200 hours per year. Ella identified that "teachers are busy people too, so we don't want to add to already full plates, especially if we want collaboration to be done well because it is a priority." This is where establishing a "set framework, [a] set agenda so everyone knows where you're going" is important to the purposeful use of time. Ella discussed how in a smaller, rural school there may be times when a principal is only able to provide collaboration time to teachers by supervising the students themselves. She identified that this is important for teachers to have this time, but it then creates a struggle for the administrator to be as involved as they may like to be with the collaborative process. In the end, Ella felt that if teachers could have

collaborative experiences, regardless of whether it was teacher to teacher or teachers with administrators, "you want them to be walking out of those days feeling that it has been meaningful, this was really productive and I can sink my teeth into this stuff that we accomplished today." Ella shared that if teachers feel that their time was spent meaningfully, they will be more responsive to the collaborative process and all will feel the success that comes away from this process.

The Need to Share Experiences

The final theme that emerged through our narrative inquiry was the concept of the need to share. Ella felt it was crucial for teachers to share what they are working on:

When you openly share, the teachers that are providing their findings and their … collaboration pieces and what they implemented, are able to say what worked well, what did not work well, identify roadblocks, discuss potential solutions, and whether or not the collaboration yielded the outcome they were hoping for. It is important to share because at the same time, somebody else in the room might have that "Aha!" moment and say "Oh! I could do that" or "I could take that and tweak it this way" and then go try it out and have results to bring back and share. This gives people a chance to see the successes and the challenges that come with collaboration.

Through this process, Ella stressed it may inspire others to adopt similar work, offer solutions, join in the collaboration, or identify areas they may want to work on. Ella has helped to reinforce the idea there is a great deal of power in people seeing others succeed, but there is equally as much power in seeing that other people have struggled with a concept. Through our research conversations, Ella discussed that for those who may be reluctant, these experiences of seeing

others share about their collaborative experiences may just be the encouragement they need to feel comfortable enough to engage in a collaborative experience of their own.

One other area of collaboration that was discussed was the idea that sharing did not need to happen just within one's own school. In fact, Ella believes that the further we can share, the greater the "ripple effect that is created." In smaller schools where teachers may be the only teacher of that single grade, or even of multiple grades within the school, they need to have an opportunity to work with others in similar situations. This may mean creating opportunities within a district for teachers to engage together in collaboration away from their own school setting. Ella spoke of the importance of connecting with others outside of your own district: "Seeing what others are doing in other places can help you to make your own" school and staff better. When people are able to "share outside of their own bubbles", they have the opportunity to learn from others as well as share their own learning with others. This helps "to bring in new ideas and create collaborative experiences" that may not otherwise exist.

Discussion

Ella's experiential stories helped confirm how important collaboration can be in the teaching profession. Not only does it help to build relationships, but it can shape and strengthen the skills of teachers, which can shape student learning. Our conversations focused mainly on the work that occurs between administrators and teachers, and teachers and teachers; however, we did talk about "the ripple effect" that improved pedagogy has on student outcomes.

I was not surprised to discover that, for Ella, relationships within the school and between colleagues was a critical feature to the success of collaboration. Numerous times over our conversations, Ella identified the need for strong relationships built on trust. She felt that if

educators are going to "buy into" collaboration there needs to be a sharp focus. Through focused goal-setting by the group, Ella's experiences have shown her that authentic engagement and growth could occur.

I found it interesting that Ella identified the need for administrators to be involved, but not "take over" the process. Rather, she saw their role as one of being a supporter. She identified the need to provide time, access to resources, and moral support as all being critical elements to collaboration. Ella discussed how many administrators feel the need to be the lead learner and that they "have a vision for where they want things to go." Because of this vision, I would imagine that "not taking over" could be a challenge for many administrators. I would imagine that having the collaboration evolve to where the principal envisions it going would be an exercise in patience.

Principals embracing teachers taking the lead in the collaborative process highlights the important link between the establishment of trusting relationships and the success of the collaboration group. Without strong relationships built on trust, Ella felt quite strongly that collaborative practices would struggle and be forced. There would be a lack of "buy-in" from teachers and as a result, goals would not be fully reached, if reached at all. It was not surprising to hear this as she discussed her experiences. Reciprocally, if there was a strong relationship, success often came in "waves," even if it was not a perfect process. Ella talked about successes she has personally experienced in working collaboratively with teachers. She included examples such as teachers experiencing a gain in confidence, improvements to student learning, a shift in how teachers plan and engage students in the learning process, as well as embracing new methods to track student learning. Ultimately, Ella saw success as the development of "new [or] shared expertise in experience and growth" for teachers in a particular area.

Ella did not just focus on the successes. She identified that collaboration is a growth process and that missteps sometimes happened. This included groups not working well together, often because of lack of focus or goal setting. Sometimes these missteps meant that teachers had to reevaluate their direction and the impact their missteps may have had on student learning. Sometimes, Ella recounted, "teachers had to start over and change their focus because what they were doing was not working." Ella clarified that even though missteps happened, it "did not mean that growth couldn't happen. It just means having another look and trying again." She said that it was important for administrators to establish strong relationships with teachers in order for missteps to not be devastating. Ella felt that, the collaborative teams grew as a result even through the missteps, in large part because they trusted the administrator and each other.

When setting out to engage in my research, I was primarily thinking about the collaboration that existed between administrators and teachers, as well as teacher-to-teacher collaboration. I had not considered the collaborative relationship that exists between administrators. Through our discussions, Ella pointed out that there is a strong collaborative relationship that exists between administrators within the school district that she works in. These relationships are developed over time, and look different at different points in the school year based on the district goals as well as overall goals of each school. However, these relationships are important for administrator growth and generally lead back to administrators supporting teachers within their own schools. Ella pointed out that as the lead learners within their own schools, administrators can, at times, feel isolated. Having other administrators in different locations provides a different perspective and a layer of support that can allow the administrator to continue to be a confident leader of learning within their own school.

Through our discussions of the evolution of collaboration in the last ten years, Ella highlighted the collaboration that exists within social media platforms. She identified that there are numerous teacher-sharing groups on Facebook. Within these groups, teachers can post what they are seeking help with and generally receive a wide variety of feedback within minutes. Often this feedback is positive encouragement and is accompanied by the sharing of resources. Teachers are then able to take what someone has shared with them and use it in their own settings, or change it to better suit their particular context. If they make changes, many teachers will share any changes they made back to the original source. Through these posts, others will ask for support in the same area. There appears to be a generosity of sharing resources rather than hoarding materials and ideas. We discussed a variety of other social media platforms where teachers share their resources, often free or for a minimal cost. Prior to the arrival of social media platforms, teachers relied on each other to share, and as Ella mentioned in our conversations, many teachers worked as "silos" or "islands" and rarely shared, being left "on their own to figure it out." We agreed that teachers who are beginning their careers now have an opportunity that we did not when we began and it was our consensus that this is a betterment for the teaching profession. Teachers now are more likely to have a starting place for lesson and unit plans rather than being overwhelmed by their new teaching jobs. Ella stated that "often, first year teachers get the toughest assignments that cover a wide variety of topics" which can make planning very challenging. These social networks, as well as collaboration within the school, are areas that can be potentially great support areas to those new teachers.

As I reflect on my research conversations with Ella and the themes that emerged, I feel hopeful for the direction that collaboration is taking educators. I feel that there is a significant opportunity for administrators to collaborate alongside teachers and take the lead, not only in

learning alongside the teachers they serve but in leading the way. Ella has reminded me that as education moves forward, administrators do not have to have all of the answers. Rather they need to be "paving the pathway for success" by helping to "eliminate some of the barriers" and lead alongside teachers through trusting, collaborative relationships.

Looking forward

Throughout this research, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my own practice as an administrator. I have considered areas where I feel I demonstrate strengths that would benefit the collaborative process, as well as areas where I need to grow to better support collaboration with teachers.

Ella spoke at length about the importance of relationships between teachers and administrators, and the powerful role that strong relationships can play in the success of a collaborative group. This was also reinforced through many areas of my literature review. This has given me a sense of affirmation about the importance I place on building relationships with the teachers I am responsible for, while challenging me to consider the relationships that may need more nurturing. Ella provided me with some good examples of how I can work to support teachers through asking questions, using data, and providing support to not only move collaboration forward, but to build relationships. Ella repeated numerous times that when trust exists between administrators and teachers, teachers are more likely to be receptive to working alongside administrators in collaboration.

Collecting of data and using it to inform collaboration is an area where I have felt less confidence as an administrator. In speaking with Ella through our research conversations, I feel that I have learned some ways to support my own growth as an administrator that will support

the growth of teachers. I think that often administrators are asked by others for data that involves numbers and is more frequently connected to standardized tests. I find it can be easy to lose sight of other forms of data that can be equally important to identifying areas for growth. Utilizing some of the other types of data that Ella identified could be beneficial to working alongside teachers in collaboration. My experiences have been that many teachers feel more comfortable with data that includes observations rather than a standardized test. While I feel both are important, when supporting teachers and considering relationships, there is room for utilizing other methods to begin the collaborative process.

One of my final takeaways from my research conversations with Ella would be the need for organization and structure within a collaborative group. Creating time and opportunity for teachers to work is important, but ensuring there is a sense of accountability through goal setting and direction is equally important. One of the struggles I have is finding balance between teacher autonomy and administrative direction for collaboration. While Ella and I did not delve into this, I do feel that this is an area for future consideration. Is it possible to have a balance between these two elements?

Based on my personal experiences, I believe that administrators have come a long way since the start of my career, in terms of supporting teacher growth and in working collaboratively alongside teachers. It is my personal opinion that there is still work to be done in this area; work that will likely never end as we continuously learn new ways and methods for achieving growth together. I hope that my research conversations with Ella might serve as affirmation for some that they are on the right track in working with teachers, and for others might act as inspiration to engage with teachers in the important work of collaboration. I believe that when we are able to work together, we are able to grow together.

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Appendix A: Information and Consent Letter

Letter of Introduction and Informed Consent Form

Study Title: Perceptions of a K-12 Principal with Collaboration alongside Teachers

Researcher: Brenna Liddell, B. Ed

My name is Brenna Liddell and I am an Assistant Principal at Edwin Parr Composite School located in Athabasca, AB. At present, I am completing a Masters in Education in Educational Leadership at Concordia University of Edmonton. As part of my program requirements I am conducting a research study. The focus of my research is on the principal's experiences with collaboration alongside teachers. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Before you agree to participate in this study, I strongly encourage you to read the explanation of this study that follows. This statement describes the purpose and procedure of the study. You will also find that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any time. This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of Concordia University of Edmonton.

Explanation of Procedures

I am engaging in this research in the hopes of learning more about how a principal working collaboratively alongside teachers can support a teacher's growth and development. Through working with you, I hope to gain insight into your experiences as both a teacher and an administrator in working collaboratively alongside teachers. In order to conduct this study, I will be using a narrative inquiry methodology, which will allow you to share your stories and experiences with collaboration alongside teachers. This may also include the sharing of personal artifacts, stories, photographs, creative work and the creation of a timeline outlining your experiences. Over the next four months, this study will consist of three one-to-one interviews which will last approximately one hour. The time and location of the interviews will be held at a place you choose. Our conversations will be recorded and transcribed.

Potential Risks

Throughout this process, I will make every effort to minimize any potential risks. Possible risks to your participation in this research could include emotional feelings such as sadness, regret or frustration when sharing your past experiences.

Benefits

The anticipated benefits to participating in this study would be the opportunity to share your experiences, wisdom and perceptions on the value of collaboration alongside teachers. As an administrator, participation could assist in identifying areas for improvement in collaborative practice with teachers and/or administrator colleagues. Your participation will also help inform my practice as a school administrator as well as those who may choose to read my final published work or those who may attend any type of presentation associated to my research project.

<u>Confidentiality</u>

Your privacy and confidentiality is extremely important to me and I will protect it at all times throughout the research project. All material collected throughout the project will be safeguarded to ensure confidentiality. Upon completion of the project, study data including personal information about you, will be securely stored for up to six months after which time it will be destroyed. I will be the only person to have access to the study data and information collected during our time together. Your name will not appear in any of my research texts, notes or interview transcripts. Your name and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of this study. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings. The wisdom gained through this project will be of great value in guiding administrators and teachers in working collaboratively alongside one another.

<u>Withdrawal without Prejudice</u>

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any question I might ask you.

<u>Further Questions and Follow-Up</u>
You are welcome to ask me any questions that occur to you during the research. If you have further questions once the research is completed, you are encouraged to contact me using the contact information given below. If, as a result of participating in this study you feel the need for further, longer-term support, please contact me at any time using my contact information at the bottom of this page.

If you have other questions or concerns about the study please contact the chair of Concordia University of Edmonton's Research Ethics Board at reb@concordia.ab.ca.

I,_____(name; please print clearly), have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

_____   _____

       Participant Signature   Date
If:
   (a) you would like a copy of your research conversation transcripts once they are available
   (b) you are interested in information about the study
   results as a whole and/or
   (c) if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for possible
   follow-up research conversations, please provide contact information below:

Check those that apply:
    ____   I would like copies of my research conversation transcripts

_____ I would like information about the study results
_____ I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Write your address clearly below. Please also provide an email address if you have one.

Mailing address:

Email address:

Researcher contact information:
Brenna Liddell
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Appendix B: Open-Ended Questions

Perceptions of a K-12 Principal with Collaboration alongside Teachers

Possible Interview Questions

Background – Central and Sub Questions:

Central Question – What are the experiences of one kindergarten to grade 12 school principal with collaboration alongside teachers?

Sub Questions:

- How does the participant feel about collaboration within the education setting?

- What, if any value, does collaboration have between teachers and administrators?

- What are the participants own early experiences with collaboration between teachers and administrators?

- What is/are the tension(s) in the participants' experiences with collaboration alongside teachers?

Getting to know your questions:

- (Once I have introduced myself) Please tell me a little about yourself.

- What are your earliest professional memories of collaboration?

- What are your most vivid memories of collaboration with teachers and/or administrators?

- What were some of the triumphs?

- What were some of the challenges?

- What is one thing you are really proud of when you think of collaborating alongside teachers?

Let conversation flow from here, some follow up probing questions could include:

- How have your experiences with collaboration evolved over the course of your career?

- In your experiences, is collaboration between administrators and teachers different?

- How do you create an environment that supports collaboration with administrators alongside teachers?

- What are some of the successes of collaborating alongside teachers that you have experienced?

- What are some of the greatest challenges when it comes to being an administrator when collaborating alongside teachers?

- Do you feel that teachers benefit when they collaborate alongside administrators? Please elaborate.

- Do you feel that administrators benefit when they collaborate alongside teachers? Please elaborate.

- Do you feel there is a benefit to students when teachers and administrators collaborate alongside one another? Please elaborate.

- In your experiences, does the number of years a teacher has been teaching play a role in their willingness to collaborate alongside administration? Please elaborate.

- In your experiences, does the gender of the teacher play a role in their willingness to engage in collaboration alongside administration? Please elaborate.

- If you could implement something that would support future collaboration between administrators and teachers, what would it be?

- What advice would you give to administrators who are considering exploring collaboration alongside teachers? Why that piece of advice?