TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION:

An Autobiography

by

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Acknowledgments

Abstract

This autobiographical study addresses the question of how/why have I as a principal been able to create a transformational education environment. To uncover how transformation has taken place in my schools, I drew upon 298 pages of reflective papers written over nine courses of my M. Ed. program, along with an additional five years' worth of personal digital notes taken from each course and the anecdotal records of situations that occurred in my practice. Using Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline,* as a theoretical lens, I unearthed seven themes: social awareness; systems thinking; personal mastery; mental models; shared vision; team learning and leadership model. The project concludes with eleven tips for new or experienced principals looking to create a transformational education community.

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## PART ONE
## Setting the Stage


**Introduction**

I have always been interested in transformation.  As an experienced principal leader I have been fascinated by the tension between the individual and the collective in the process of transformation, and have chosen to make this exploration explicit in my final Master's project.

English novelist Charles Edward Montague said, "There is no limit to what a man can do so long as he does not care a straw who gets the credit for it." In a narcissistic society, independence and individualism are seen as the be-all-and-end-all of human potential. Individualism "can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "we."" (The Hofstede Center).

The idea perpetuated within an individualistic society is that the accomplishments and accolades of any one individual are more important than the accomplishments and collective growth of a group. Alternately, a collectivist society views the individual as an important part of the group. My personal mental model – a concept discussed later in this paper – is that the empowerment of others, and doing what is right for others is just as important as making sure I look after myself, and this concept is derived from a wisdom tradition - the axiom of Jesus Christ who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself". This then begs the question of who is my neighbour? The answer is that anyone I happen to be connected with is worthy of neighborly treatment. Martin Buber shares this position as described by Dwayne Huebner:

> "You go from what Buber calls an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship. The
> butterfly and the fellow traveler and the rainbow and the pebble are no longer just

objects and you a subject. They too become subjects, which cannot be completely grasped. They have an existence alongside your existence. They too occupy this world and are independent of you, not related to you or your needs. They will continue to occupy the world until their time comes, just as you will continue to occupy it until your time comes. You encounter these phenomena as other existents and if they have sensory powers they encounter you as another existent. Then the two of you are in relationship, participating in life together, journeying down through time, side-by-side, together, yet apart." (Huebner, 1999, p. 5)

This then describes why some desire to treat people the best they can in their imperfect state and why they can be empathetic to those they encounter - because we are all fellow travelers on a road that needs to be shared. This final Master of Education project invites the reader into my autobiographical journey to uncover the collective mental model underpinning the creation of a transformational education environment

The research project is divided into four parts. In Part One, I introduce my project and locate myself in the study and outline my research question and its greater relevance. In Part Two I present a brief literature review and the autobiographical methodology it followed. Part Three presents the themes from my autobiographical explorations while Part Four brings the project to a close with some tips about transforming an educational environment.

**Locating myself**

When I left University in 1980 it was my intention to never walk back into the university building again; it wasn't that I was a terrible student – I was average – I just did not want to be in the academic arena any more. My goal was to do something pragmatic that could help foster transformational change in my life and the lives of those with whom I might interact. Within a month of graduating, I immediately began teaching in public school. I was told what I would be teaching, was given a room and was left alone to fend for myself, except when I would be bold enough to venture out and ask someone to lend me a little help. When I ventured out to seek help, I was met with reluctance in sharing information and any that was shared was more or less just given to me, and I was again left to fend for myself. Deep down, I knew something was wrong

with these scenarios, but I had no idea what that was until approximately six years ago when I learned that as high as 50% of teachers entering the teaching profession leave within the first five years of their careers (Ingersoll, 2012).

My daughter was one of those casualties who called me one day and said "Daddy, I cannot stay in a world where everybody works independently and reluctantly works together as a team. It doesn't make sense to me." She grew up in a family where interdependence was key and where collaborating, discussing and sharing ideas was as natural as breathing. For her to be thrust into the situation where she was - like I had been in my early career - left to fend for herself, prompted me to respond to the invitation of Dr. Bilash - my now graduate program supervisor - to take some academic courses so I could acquire an academic perspective on how transformational change comes about in the world of education. After some back and forth discussion I finally acquiesced to take a course on professional development models from Dr. Bilash. In the course were teachers and administrators from various jurisdictions in Alberta. I was surprised, even shocked, to hear many of them recount their largely negative experiences in the field of education and it became apparent to me that not much had changed since the 1980s; statistically it was evident that there had to be some tangible reason as to why so many left and were leaving the field of education.

In the schools where I have been an administrator, according to teacher surveys – along with conversations - the majority of my staff members were happily engaged in their work as educators. I was intrigued why this would be, and so I set out on an uncharted course to study educational theory as a means of assisting me in making sense of the successes I was witnessing as a school administrator, and putting into words my own style of leadership. I realized that what I heard expressed was not the experience my staff was having and after successfully completing the course I decided to apply to complete further graduate studies.

I realized that acquiring the academic theories to understand my work in education, in missions, in business, would allow for some aspects of my practice to prove useful for me and perhaps also for colleagues in the field of education, both in the present and the future. My life has not followed a straight line trajectory – I taught for four and a half years, then worked with an inner city church for a year to try and make connections

between the church and the surrounding community; after this I worked another six and a half years overseas in a missionary capacity mentoring and doing humanitarian work; I then reentered the teaching profession in 1990 and in 1994 began my own business, running it concurrently as I taught for the next eight years; I left teaching again for six months to pursue a full-time business career that was short-lived and after the events of 9-11 I reentered education again. I have been in that world ever since. My myriad experiences - a blend of teaching, humanitarian work within Edmonton and in a foreign country, coupled with the complexities of running a business - allowed me to approach the world of education, particularly once I was recruited into an administrative capacity, with an entrepreneurial mindset. As the above also shows, my experiences also carved a firm set of I-thou values that enabled me to interact with others and nurture a collective educational environment.  Along with what follows this autobiographical exploration reveals how the collective mindset laid the groundwork for transformation. Its limitations are discussed in the section on methodology.

**Research question**

I have always been interested in learning, am an avid reader and have never been satisfied with the *status quo*. As a young married man, people warned me that marriage would become boring. It hasn't. I wouldn't allow it. I was told that children are a pain. They weren't and are not. I was told that teenagers would be nothing but trouble. They weren't, they were wonderful. I was told I was crazy to think that I could make a change in a country as vast and as wild as Pakistan. That did not stop me. The changes that began there in 1986 are still having effects to this day.  I never thought I wanted to be an administrator because I felt that many administrators were out of touch with what teachers really needed.  But I accepted the jobs offered and through the reflection offered by my M. Ed. Program I unearthed how empathy towards others, humility and mindfulness (Van Manen, 1990), courage and self-challenge coagulate to become a change-agent for others. These six years helped crystallize for me the question I desired to see answered in this, my final Master of Education project: how/why have I as an educator been able to create a transformational education environment? Please join me in this autoethnographical journey about school transformation.

**Relevance and timeliness of this study**

The position of a principal is multi-faceted; leading change is very difficult because of the closed-system that is education. By the time a teacher exits University, he/she has been exposed to 13,000 hours of a particular method of delivering education. Much of this is related to the teacher being the keeper of all information, working in isolation, not working with colleagues, with the mindset that students are repositories of information and not constructors or co-constructors. It is often expected – an unspoken norm - that a principal should default to that same thinking process. Simultaneously, there is desire for change afoot and a belief that such change is best directed in a top down manner.

A study that is archived in the Alberta Teachers' Association library entitled *The Future of the Principalship in Canada: A National Research Study*, highlights the top-down bottom-up tensions facing principals today:

> The core question that this report raises is whether [principals] will become overloaded by managing change agendas that are handed to them from higher up, or whether they will be expected and empowered to lead our schools, our teachers and our children to create a world where technology does not distract us, diversity does not divide us and mental health is a good that collaborative communities can create together. (The Alberta Teacher's Association, 2014, p. 1)

In essence the report asks principals to balance the top-down political agenda with the bottom-up humanistic one. My paper attempts to shed light on this process through a deep reflection on my experiences, especially at the bottom-up level.

Understanding the theoretical lens through which I interpret my data – Peter Senge's five disciplines of systems thinking - and more specifically understanding how to challenge mental models – can be the first step in changing the current mindsets in education, whether they be held by policy makers or the internal thought processes of teachers already in the system, or public opinion.

Change happens slowly. This paper attempts to reveal to those in administrative positions - who have the power to make decisions towards change – successful examples of change within this prescribed educational system, to empower both themselves and those whom they are attempting to lead. I offer this autobiography as relevant and timely

possibilities for my less optimistic fellow Albertan urban administrators.  The drop-out rates of beginning teachers are staggering, but collaborative teaching practices along with the five dimensions of Senge's  (2006) model for system change, as exemplified by the themes presented in this paper, offer hope for a transformational change that could reduce the number of teachers who want to leave the profession. In fact, with the appropriate supports of this model teachers may desire to stay and grow:

> When collaborative teacher enquiry approaches, such as this, are embedded in a culture where teachers are empowered to take charge of their own improvement then we see improved morale and retention for staff and greater depth of learning and engagement for the young people in our classes. It's this approach, along with a supportive leadership that reduces bureaucratic burdens, that actively supports effective behaviour management and prioritises teacher learning. This can work towards ensuring that we are able to not only keep our most experienced professionals in the classroom but also ensure they keep improving, year-on-year. (Weston, 2013)

Additionally, as a survey study from Quebec reports, "better support in general and better administrative support in particular as well as university training that better provides the requisite skills" are suggested preventative measures for teacher attrition (Karsenti et al., 2013, p. 147).

**PART TWO**

**Literature Review and Methodology**

The following section comprises a Literature Review that outlines the theoretical lens I employ in this paper along with the research methodology I followed. The latter includes data collection tools, research process, ethics, trustworthiness, transferability and limitations of this research.

**Literature Review**

As the world becomes more interconnected and business becomes more complex and dynamic, work must become more learningful. It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organization, a Ford or a Sloan or a Watson or a Gates. It's just not possible any longer to figure it out from the top, and have everyone else following the orders of the grand strategist. The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization. (Senge, 2006, p. 25)

Senge goes on to say we are all learners. I agree. I am a new grandpa and watching my grandson discover new things each time I am around him is exciting and reminds me that intrinsic to humans is the desire to learn. I also believe there is a desire to belong and be recognized, to be part of something positive, to be intimate, to be involved, and to feel like an important part of a whole. Growing up in a small town, I learned early in life how important it was to be part of a community and that many hands made light work. It is a truth that has been with me my whole life and a business and administrative model that Senge has formalized into a way of looking at positive growth. Knowing that all people desire to learn and wish to be part of something bigger has influenced me intrinsically, and by unearthing this in others it is possible to see positive results, regardless of the endeavor. Senge (2006) believes that five new component themes are gradually converging to innovate learning organizations (p. 30). Each has a vital dimension in building organizations that can learn and enhance their capacity to

reach their highest aspirations. I am using Senge's five disciplines of system's thinking as the base for interpreting the work I have done in the schools where I have been principal.

**Systems thinking.** As a storm gathers several components all work simultaneously to create a weather pattern. These hidden systems work together and create the vital rain, which feeds the soil, and helps sustain life. Each action has an effect on the rest but is hidden from view. It is possible to understand the system by contemplating the whole, not solely the isolated individual parts of the pattern. Senge states that business and other human endeavors are also systems. "They, too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other…System thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge that has been developed over the past 50 years, to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively" (Senge, 2006, pp. 31-32). Senge describes five disciplines that form system's thinking – personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning and the fifth dimension.  I describe each briefly below and further elaborate upon them in Part Four of the project.

**Personal mastery.** Mastery is a personal level of proficiency, just like an artist continually practicing to improve whatever his/her craft may be and striving to continually improve. There is a sense of being committed to lifelong learning and continuous improvement. By empowering the individuals within an organization, the levels they can reach are limited only by their desire to grow and change. "This is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. As such it is an essential cornerstone of the learning organization—the learning organization's spiritual foundation" (Senge, 2006, p. 32).  Senge (2006) is most interested in the personal learning and the organizational learning, "in the reciprocal commitments between an individual and the organization, and in the special spirit of an enterprise made up of learners" (p. 34). Personal mastery in this context means to become the best one can be in a team in order to improve the overall corporate efficacy of the group; the results of personal mastery can become even more pronounced because of the synergy involved in this group process which begins with each individual pursuing mastery, not for the sake of competitive gain, but rather for the purpose of collaborative growth.

**Mental models.** For Senge (2006) "Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (p. 34). Often we are not aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior. Senge (2006) believes "the discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny" (p.36). Once this occurs it can be repeated as needed, can be changed as required and allows individual learning to intertwine with organizational learning.

**Building shared vision.** All successful organizations have been able to galvanize a shared picture of the direction they will go and take the steps necessary to turn that shared vision into a reality. A vision statement without any buy-in from those within the organization is just a collection of words on a piece of paper without adherence. A charismatic leader may rally the troops to an ideal, but that dies relatively quickly if there is no shared vision. "The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. In mastering this discipline, leaders learn the counter productiveness of trying to dictate a vision, no matter how heartfelt" (Senge, 2006, p. 38).

**Team learning.** Team learning involves the discipline of dialogue. Through dialogue we can understand what undermines the growth of a learning organization - which mental models are limiting individuals in their discovery of new methods of working together and which ones are useful as catalysts for change. Defensiveness or protecting one's turf/ideas to guard against anything new or different is something to be unearthed as well as to determine which ingrained patterns of thinking or doing are inhibiting new thoughts and actions. Those things that once may have undermined learning can become the catalysts which accelerate learning. "Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations." (Senge, 2006, p. 40)

**The fifth discipline.** Senge is adamant that the five disciplines develop as an ensemble. The name of his book *The Fifth Discipline* is couched herein. This is why systems thinking is the fifth discipline. It is the discipline that integrates the other disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. "By enhancing the other disciplines, we are continually reminded that the whole can exceed the sum of its parts" (Senge, 2006, p. 43).

**Methodology**

In this section of the project I discuss the methodology that was used to guide this autobiographical study, including the data collection tools, research process, ethics, trustworthiness, transferability and limitations.

**Autobiography.** "Using the self as a location of research is well known in many disciplines. Anthropologists call it autoethnography; literary scholars discuss memoirs, journals and autobiography; educational research explores the self in learning and transformation" (Bilash, 2014, p. 3) I am "doing research that uses the personal to investigate the social" (Ruiz-Junco & Vidal-Ortiz, 2011, p. 193). I am using reflections on my practice to explore how transformational change can take place through school leadership. I "use emotions as part of the rational analysis of the social, inviting readers to a form of knowledge that does not exclude their own feelings…auto-ethnography is an account of the anthropologist as insider – *auto* – writing about the group to which she or he belongs – *ethno*" (Ruiz-Junco & Vidal-Ortiz, 2011, p. 195).

**Data collection tools.** All research questions are explored through data and to extract the data requires data collection tools. An autoethnography necessarily requires data written by the author and a systematic review and interpretation of it. To uncover how transformation has taken place in schools, I drew upon all of the reflective papers written over nine courses of my M. Ed. program. I also consulted personal anecdotes and notes about scholarly texts.

**Reflective papers**. For me, sorting data from my reflective papers took on the look of "tidying up" - "an absolutely necessary first step to coding and analyzing data" (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). "Tidying up permits researchers to make a preliminary

assessment of the data set" (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). To be useful for the purpose of autoethnography, the six years of work that comprised my graduate studies were catalogued and reviewed within some of LeCompte's suggested rules: making copies of data, putting all work into folders based on date of creation, creating an index for all data, and collecting additional data to fill any gaps in my research (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). The list can be found in Appendix A.

To support the autoethnographic methodology, personal data were taken primarily from sources such as work completed in graduate courses, reflective journals kept throughout the past six years of graduate work, personal narratives from the past and present, as well as blog posts and emails. Each graduate level course and its corresponding written requirements over a six year period – whether literature reviews, journal entries or other academic papers – were dated and filed by course name and year. Multiple works completed for a single class have been sub-labeled either A, B, or C etc. depending on the number of written assignments. An appendix has been created (Appendix A) which clearly outlines this catalogue of personal work. These data form the bulk of the research used in this paper. For example, the first paper of three written for a course named Foundations of Curriculum EDSE 503 taught by Dr. Terrance Carson in 2009 at the University of Alberta would receive the title of 503A, 2009 and so forth.

**Personal Anecdotes**. There were many anecdotal records which were not submitted for class work but which I maintained in Evernote during this six-year period while operating as an administrator and completing my graduate studies. During the progress of every graduate class taken, I simultaneously compiled notes and thoughts from the class along with anecdotes happening in my administrative practice; I kept anything I thought may be useful for analyzing my own data in the future. This became an archive of my thoughts as influenced by those around me, peers, professors, articles, etc. This archive is stored digitally in Evernote. These have not been catalogued, but many of the thoughts recorded during that time are woven throughout this paper to substantiate and further confirm the thematic findings that have emerged as a result of the process of coding.

**Scholarly texts**. Additionally, in my five formal years of graduate studies, I was exposed to a variety of academic theories and their authors, some of which resonated and/or perturbed me (Maturana, 1974) to the point of reevaluating some of the positions I had

held and also substantiating and validating those things which I was doing well without being able to describe or explain why. These authors and the research-based studies that followed lent credence and became the catalysts to assist me in analyzing and interpreting my approaches to contributing to transformational change.

Thus, I further supplement my collected field notes and personal anecdotes with scholarly articles and books that provide the framework wherein my personal experiences found and find greater meaning and credibility, with the primary purpose that my experiences may be of value to others as they look to create a positive learning environment in their own organization.

**Research process.** After collecting all of the data sources, I began a process of coding and interpreting data and selecting pieces for the final project. For the purpose of coding the data used to create themes for this paper, I drew upon 298 pages of written and submitted graduate papers, along with an additional five years' worth of personal digital notes taken from each course and the anecdotal records of situations that occurred in my practice which I felt could become very influential and possible examples of the importance of critical incidents (Tripp, 1993).

I recognize that this is a qualitative study.

> Good qualitative data are as unbiased as possible. However, because such data are collected by human beings, and because people are interested in certain things and not others, selections are made. People tend to record as data what makes sense and intrigues them. Selectivity cannot be eliminated, but it is important to be aware of how it affects data collection, and hence, the usefulness and credibility of research results. (LeCompte, 2000, p. 146)

In all of this work, I used Senge's theoretical lenses to guide the selection of anecdotes. I found seven themes which are reported in the next section of this final project.

> Finding items in data sets resembles sifting and sorting, somewhat analogous to sifting flour to remove weevils. At first, the flour may appear quite acceptable, but sifting it concentrates the weevils so that they appear in the remaining raw flour. Data are sifted by repeated readings through field notes…and text to identify items relevant to the research questions. (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148)

**Ethics.** Although the field notes compiled from the courses I took during my graduate studies are indexed chronologically, the examples quoted from those documents do not appear chronologically in this paper in an attempt to guard the identities of the individuals referenced as the socio-cultural group from which my research data are derived. This paper never references names, places, or dates, and I have endeavored to obscure any specific references to any specific individual or group within any specific school. When I state "in an earlier principalship", this phrase may be referencing my most recent principalship or a past one, but for the purpose I have already described, I intend not to be more specific. I have included one publicly published blog post with permission from the writer – a former teacher in a school where I was principal – along with a published article within a University magazine that was written about a school where I was principal. However, in the scope of the length of this paper, those examples that are quoted do not reference a place or person specifically. Furthermore, I have completed the necessary hours of ethics training required for heightening my awareness of how to avoid implicating other people in my work without their express written permission or presenting any person in a negative light in order to make my findings appear more plausible or reliable.

**Trustworthiness.**  In my five years of graduate work I took nine courses from five different University professors at two Universities, and presented multiple papers on multiple topics relevant to leadership in Secondary Education. The research data produced as a result of these courses were analyzed for credit from a diverse group of professors within the field of Secondary Education studies. Knowing that my work has been reviewed by a variety of professors, along with my graduate coordinator, lends to the trustworthiness of the research data.

**Transferability.** All administrators are charged with providing a safe and caring environment in which learning can occur for staff and students alike. They are also charged with producing real results for real students in a multitude of locations; and, although there may be a unique cultural habitus (Hofstede, 1991, p. 4) students still need to become learners, teachers still need to teach, and administrators need to organize and lead their schools in such a way that the best possible outcomes – as determined by their specific locations – can be realized. For this reason, the themes of this paper may provide

insight into the complexities within any given learning organization; Senge's theoretical lens - and the use of it in my own practice as illustrated in the paper - may prove to be of value to other administrators.

**Limitations.** One of the limiting factors of this kind of method is of course, my natural bias, along with my own mental models that I am aware interfere with objectivity. I may conjecture that it is very difficult, given the nature of human beings, to be fully objective in any situation. Even quantitative data can fall prey to the predator of subjectivity, opinion and bias because the self tends to interject whatever mental model is operating in the individual, either on the surface or quietly in the background, creating interference in a pure objective analysis of any string of data. Because my life's focus has been on the empowerment of others, I may miss subtle cues as to when people are not being empowered or may be taking advantage of my trust in them; others may say the right things to me, and yet do something different. Because I tend to be very positive, my default is to look at those things that emphasize the positive while downplaying those things that might be negative. This is a huge limitation - as some glaring mistakes - while obvious to others, may be clouded by this outlook, possibly rendering some of my comments as superfluous and irrelevant.

# PART THREE

## Thematic Findings

In the following section, I present seven thematic findings: Social Awareness, Noticing and Reflexivity; Systems Thinking; Personal Mastery; Mental Models; Shared Vision; Team Learning; and Leadership Model. Themes Two to Six are based primarily on the elements of the book *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge (as detailed in the literature review found in Part Two of this paper).

"A theoretical lens is a guiding perspective or ideology that provides structure for advocating for groups or individuals" (Creswell, 2012, p. 505). As has already been stated, Senge's five disciplines have been the underpinnings that best describe how I have operated the schools in which I have been principal/provided leadership. Thus, his five disciplines will serve as my theoretical lens. The best summary of his work – in particular the five disciplines of systems thinking, shared vision, mental models, personal mastery, and team learning - is found in his own penmanship:

> Systems thinking also needs the disciplines of building shared vision, mental models, team learning, and personal mastery to realize its potential. Building a shared vision fosters a commitment to the long term. Mental models focus on the openness needed to unearth shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning develops the skills of the groups of people to look for the larger picture beyond individual perspectives. And personal mastery fosters the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect our world. Without personal mastery, people are so steeped in the reactive mindset ("someone/something else is creating my problems") that they are deeply threatened by the systems perspective. At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind-from seeing ourselves separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something out there to seeing how our own actions create the problems we experience. A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it. (Senge, 2006, p. 44)

In addition to the five themes correlating to the five disciplines of system's thinking and a final one on the leadership process, three processes have been significant in recording the autobiographical content upon which this project is based: social awareness (Goleman, 2006), noticing (Mason, 2002) and reflexivity (O'Reilly, 2009). These I offer as my first theme.

**Theme 1: Social awareness, noticing and reflexivity**

Social awareness "refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner state, to understanding…feelings and thoughts, to "getting" complicated social situations" (Goleman, 2006, p. 84). Within my many educational environments, and especially as a school principal, I have had to develop the ability to see a situation from both sides instantaneously. I know that if I react to it I will make any possible problem worse, but if I respond by drawing others in, they no longer remain aloof or outside of it, but rather become part of the solution. I have found that because humans have a highly developed sense of self-preservation, once they are drawn into the set of circumstances as a participant and are no longer alien to it, they will work together with me to find an appropriate solution. A strong social awareness has made this possible in my life.

The concept of noticing "increase(s) sensitivity to notice opportunities to act, while at the same time, to have come to mind in the moment when they are relevant, a range of possible appropriate actions" (Mason, 2002, Preface, xi). A strong social awareness, coupled with an ability to take decisive and appropriate action has enhanced my reflexive practice and thus, the research found in this paper. Being able to be reflexive is another necessary discipline in each one of my roles, as well as in my research. I think "reflexively about who has conducted…research [in this case myself], how, and under what conditions, and what impact these might have …" (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 187). It was only once I had reentered academia that I understood the strength that these practice have and have added to my life's work. A reflexive autoethnographer tries

> to be honest about who has what influence over their work. They describe the
> context of the research and their place in that context, and perhaps provide some
> autobiographical details to help the reader understand their perspective

better…They learn from their own experiences, and build their analyses in
interaction with the field…Finally, they provide accounts that they realise are
fragments, just part of a picture, fallible, and imperfect, (but still better than
none). (O'Reilly, 2012, par .7)

In my various roles as coach, missionary, businessman, parent, teacher, and administrator I have attempted to think about my thinking and analyze what has influenced me and consequently how I have influenced others. Social awareness, noticing and reflexivity have served me well both practically - in my administrative roles - as well as in the context of this paper, by allowing me to place myself within the greater social context (e.g. as a reader) and utilize the anthropological importance of any given situation for the purpose of my research.

Metacognition and asking questions of myself, and those around me, has become a discipline and a practice I use consistently, including in the organization of this paper. This methodology, carried out systematically over a period of five years, and while using a theoretical lens, has helped me to unearth themes of leadership that are rooted deeply in my practice. Autoethnography makes room for the flexibility required to collect data from a multitude of everyday realities encountered while being in the middle of the muddle, so to speak. While wading through the myriad of mundane experiences found in the everyday life of an administrator, autoethnography has helped me in meaning-making, granularity of thought, and thereby has crystallized some of the systematic steps that I took to create a transformational education environment, which might possibly be useful to other individuals trying to do the same.

**Theme 2: Systems thinking**

My papers and reflections make frequent reference to system's thinking. Systems Thinking is a big picture concept, which can never on its own change an organization; its function is to provide a framework for how individual parts come together to make a whole. I frequently comment on how the big picture of Systems Thinking affects education, particularly discerning closed and open systems:

I was sitting in a grad class in 2008 after being out of any type of formal education
for over 28 years the first time I heard [that education is a closed system]. I

researched the idea and discovered that a closed system has very little, if anything to do with an outside environment. Strange, I thought. However, it did explain how my experience as a student did not seem much different than my experience as a teacher…[As] I entered the teaching profession…I found myself teaching my class the way I had been taught…A closed system cannot and will not interact with something outside of its own boundaries. Education certainly seemed this way and then when I heard the statement in the Grad class, a light bulb went off in my head and I began to acknowledge my closed system educational world. However, in whatever I have been involved with outside of school, the opposite was true. The desire to collaborate, to work together, to learn from each other and share ideas was the norm not the exception. Coming back to education in 1991 after being gone for seven years was a bit of a shock how people stuck to themselves. It was as if nothing had nor possibly would ever change. (502G, 2012, p. 1).

Senge (2006) speaks of Systems Thinking as a storm brewing (p. 31). As a storm erupts, one doesn't see all the contributing factors that created the storm; all that can be seen are the results, for example the wind and the rain. But there are all sorts of factors in the background that have come together to make the storm happen. In a school it's metaphorically the same. The following table illustrates the components of the greater system, thus revealing the complexity within the education system. In my earlier reflections in two of my Grad courses, I realized that the environment of the educational system consists of many factors that must be taken into consideration when attempting any type of systematic reform: teacher variables, school variables, societal variables, regulatory variables, and student variables. These factors are, in essence, akin to the components of the storm. See Figure 1.
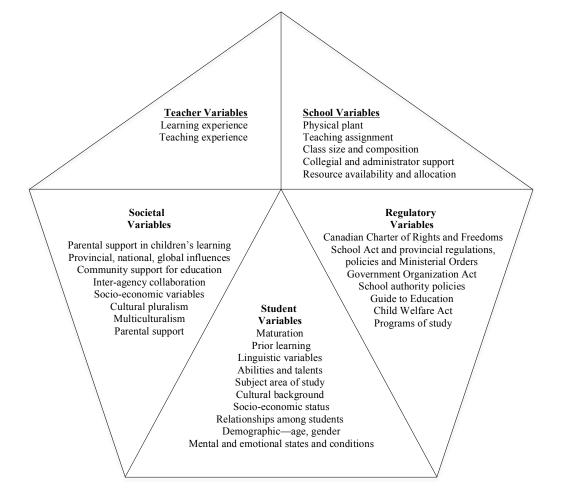
**Teacher Variables**
Learning experience
Teaching experience

**School Variables**
Physical plant
Teaching assignment
Class size and composition
Collegial and administrator support
Resource availability and allocation

**Societal Variables**

Parental support in children's learning
Provincial, national, global influences
Community support for education
Inter-agency collaboration
Socio-economic variables
Cultural pluralism
Multiculturalism
Parental support

**Regulatory Variables**
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
School Act and provincial regulations,
policies and Ministerial Orders
Government Organization Act
School authority policies
Guide to Education
Child Welfare Act
Programs of study

**Student Variables**
Maturation
Prior learning
Linguistic variables
Abilities and talents
Subject area of study
Cultural background
Socio-economic status
Relationships among students
Demographic—age, gender
Mental and emotional states and conditions

Figure 1: Based on *Teaching Quality Standard Applicable To The Provision Of Basic Education in Alberta,* 1997, pp. 3-4

"Each one of these factors alone can be…consuming in thought, time and energy" (501D, 2008, p. 2). These factors are important parts of the whole education system, but we cannot focus on these factors without considering the three big ideas - curriculum, results and collaboration - identified by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker in their book *Professional Learning Communities At Work: Best Practices For Enhancing Student Achievement* (1998). These three concepts form the umbrella under which the individual parts of a system can be more clearly understood and will be elaborated later in this paper.

What we have to do, even as educators, is understand that we find ourselves within a specific cultural environment unique to the system, and in that system, we enjoy all the elements that make the system functional. As with the storm, we most often experience

the results of a system, without being aware of the system itself.  We don't have to understand that there is a system in order to live within it. However, if we are aiming to improve it, then we must become aware of how the system functions. Systems Thinking reveals that each individual contributes his/her unique role and gifts, and effects the larger system. Teachers, students and parents need to understand this, both because it empowers them and because it can help them empower others.  The known system has to be analyzed to see how it can be utilized to help all manner of students. If I want to understand what it is I want my students to learn, I have to be able to break down the system and see how it works. This means that in a school every teacher has to take the curriculum and learn how to break it down so that it's clear for students and so that s/he can monitor where the students are on the continuum of learning. In education we have to teach students something, have to figure out if they have learned it, and then respond to whether they have or haven't (results).  And we have to do so as a team (collaboration).

I knew that the implementation of DuFour's and Eaker's three big concepts would be a way to bridge the gap between the closed and open systems, to move teachers from working in isolation to working interdependently and to help them understand where they, with their unique roles and gifts fit in to the larger system. If the parts of the system are not analyzed in conjunction with the whole, the result of working in isolation or in silos fosters the continued closed system mentality where educators will react instead of respond. Many years ago, I heard a speaker at a business conference ask the simple question, "If I told you that a patient *reacted* to medication, would that word evoke a positive or a negative image?" All people present agreed it had negative implications. And then he said, "If I said the patient *responded* to medication, what would you think?" Again, all present agreed the second word had positive implications. Part of Systems Thinking is that learners, including teachers, need the freedom to be learners. The hubbub and busyness of teachers' lives dictates their need to constantly respond to situations taking place all around them. In my experience, if *they react instead of respond,* they slip back into doing what is the easiest or most familiar, but not necessarily what is the best for the students.

If I could, I would give teachers a set number of days a month to think about their craft, how to improve their teaching and analyze work they had done during class time

with their students, allowing them to ascertain whether or not students were learning what was intended for them to learn. Perhaps then they would also start to see connections to the additional systems existing outside of the closed system of education and apply that to the learning context. In a later principalship, the following situation occurred:

> … one of my teachers who requested a PD day off to attend a workshop phoned me early in the day to let me know he had booked off the wrong day. "…He said, "I made a mistake and I'm embarrassed but I booked off the wrong time." I had the choice to berate him for his mistake, tell him he had to pay back the time, tell him to get back to the school. [But] what I did – was to believe in the value of my staff and that mistakes are opportunities to grow …"No problem, I want you to take this time to think about how your group discussed and worked on collaboration prior to my becoming principal at this school and I would like you to give some ideas of how that could be sharpened." The result was that he wrote up an excellent document, which propelled many future staff discussions. So I gave him the time, the space and the emotional freedom to think about what was really important to what he did on a daily basis. I have many times taken money from the budget and have afforded countless opportunities for teachers in my schools to have the freedom to sit down and think through what it is they need to do. (502H, 2012, p. 4)

The gift of time for educators with the proper parameters and directives can provide the framework for addressing the three big ideas – curriculum, collaboration and results. Senge (2006) indicates that there is an

> illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces. When we give up this illusion – we can then build "learning organizations," organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together…The organizations that will truly excel in the future will be the organizations that discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organization. Learning organizations are possible because, deep down, we are all learners. (pp. 24-25)

The axiom I try to live by is that the principal's learning will drive the teacher's learning and the teacher's learning will drive the student's learning (503A, 2009, p. 2). This does not mean that teachers cannot learn effectively without the leading of a principal, or that students cannot learn without the leading of a teacher, but that the interplay between all parties is stronger and more effective when the principal leads by example through continual learning, which can then determine the trajectory for the entire learning organization. Educators in a learning organization are free to discover where they fit as their contributions are recognized and are intertwined with the thoughts of their colleagues as they work together collectively. The collective efficacy of this learning organization works synergistically to affect positive change within the system. This creates the scaffold for seeing transformation in the educational realm. Upon reflection on Senge's work, I note that he is indicating that organizations should be learning organizations because those within are able to respond and grow, rather than merely react. If teachers have time for job-embedded professional development on those ideas that make a difference to a child's learning, the winners then become all of those involved in the system, firstly the students, secondly the teachers and finally the parents.

> To become meaningful, learning requires that new information be incorporated by
> the learner into an already well-developed symbolic frame of reference, an active
> process involving thought, feelings and dispositions. The learner [and I would
> argue the same for the educator] may also have to be helped to transform his or her
> frame of reference to fully understand the experience. (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10).

My reason for highlighting job-embedded professional development is that teachers need time to think through the most important and salient points of the curriculum to help scaffold learning for the learners, which also includes themselves.

In an earlier principalship,

> I received a [toy] Lion from my staff while in Anaheim at a PD session entitled
> Getting Serious about School Reform...I was not expecting anything from my staff;
> on the contrary, I wanted them to continue to have their thinking shaped by
> exposure to very clear teaching. As I reflected on the Lion and what it meant, it
> became very clear that they were acknowledging me [as leader of the pride] and for
> acknowledging them and respecting them as educators, fully expecting the best

from them as we learned together. They acknowledged how thankful they were for me choosing to spend school money on them to help them in their professional growth...This is what I am most satisfied about: hearing and seeing people articulate the shared vision for doing what is right for the students and staff at our school. I nurture teachers in the process of them nurturing students...I take my role seriously regarding my staff and students. (501B, 2010, p. 6)

One of my superintendents said that we have to be more interested in motion than in commotion; we have to be interested in what creates traction rather than slippage. Learning creates motion. Reflection provides traction. By looking at our practice in a reflective way, we can become a learning organization that responds and is proactive, making it possible to build a transformational learning system.

**Theme 3: Personal mastery**

Personal Mastery, Senge's second discipline, involves finding a core purpose that will not be compromised and having an attitude of continuous improvement toward achieving a specific purpose, and determining what the main thing is and keeping this in its rightful place of importance. "Personal mastery is the phrase we use for the discipline of personal growth and learning. People with high levels of personal growth and learning are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization" (Senge, 2006, p. 276). As per Senge's view of Personal Mastery, my earlier course work reveals how I sought to develop a core purpose, and apply it in various arenas of leadership. In the school system and in my personal life; "…a theme has emerged in my life work, including the raising of my family; I have worked hard at understanding the big picture and at figuring out the rules of each area, playing first within the rules and then pushing the boundaries. The core of my being has been to lift others up and encourage them to fully comprehend their potential. Consequently, I do everything I can to empower the individuals around me to strive for continuous improvement. I enjoy the process as much as the product" (503A, 2009, p. 7): "the journey is the reward" (Senge, 2006, p. 280). My reflections reveal that this tendency started in my early athletic endeavors, when "… [at the age of fourteen] I [unknowingly] began my quest for wanting to be a strong player

and help my teammates do well as we strived for championships together. I never realized then that my life would revolve around trying to make those around me better in whatever endeavor I was involved" (503A, 2009 p. 6).

In whichever arena an individual works, and whatever continuous improvement looks like in that sphere, Personal Mastery is the process by which individuals gain personal autonomy. A characteristic of individuals with a high level of Personal Mastery is that "They have a special sense of purpose that lies behind their visions and goals…They see current "reality" as an ally, not an enemy…They feel as if they are part of the larger creative process, which they can influence but cannot unilaterally control" (Senge, 2006, pp. 279-280). As an individual becomes cognizant about the importance of gaining Personal Mastery in their chosen field, they cannot but help to make those around them better as their skills are continually refined. If the other members of the team also adopt this attitude, then as their individual skills sharpen, they each contribute to the goal of strengthening the core purpose of the team. The unintended consequence of gaining mastery is added strength to the collective. In the academic research world this achievement is sometimes described through Action Research. I have referred to it in my schools as Plan-Do-Study-Act and repeat as necessary (Langley et al., 2009). And, as I have often quoted to my staff in the principalships I have held, "…I believe a rising tide lifts all ships and that the world is established upon hope. Couple this to action research [continuous improvement] and one can see how positive reform can occur at any school with the students being the ultimate recipients of these positive changes" (501D, 2008, p. 23). In other words, the improvement of one strengthens the collective. As an administrator this is the belief I have used to guide staff into a journey of Personal Mastery.

Personal Mastery is not getting good at something in order to dominate or manipulate others into a single focus, it is understanding that in whatever it is we do – for myself this is in the field of education – the improvement in our craft creates results that are meaningful and instructive for each of us and all of us.  Senge (2006) indicates "personal mastery suggests a special level of proficiency in every aspect of life – personal and professional" (p. 279). So how does one create a collaborative culture that is working together as a group and gaining mastery in these areas? How do an individual and a team

gain mastery at analyzing student data and using it to determine if and how students are learning? The system of teachers working together and analyzing data should be as natural as breathing, so that it is a straightforward practice and not a guessing game. As Hargreaves (1989) put it, "assessment, more than curriculum or pedagogy, has been the prime focal point for educational change" (p. 41). If teachers are asked "Can all students learn?" most will say yes. It then follows to ask: "If we believe that all students *can* learn, then what is each of us personally doing to ensure that they *do* learn?" This question can be one of the driving forces behind Personal Mastery in the educational context and in the next section I will touch on Mental Models, which can either inhibit or enhance this type of growth.

By reflecting on this question further, the educator can get better at designing lessons and refining their ideas to the point that their Mastery as an individual leads them to easily comprehend their students' level of understanding and how to adjust their teaching accordingly. This exemplifies individual mastery. And "When personal mastery becomes a discipline – an activity we integrate into our lives – it embodies two underlying movements. The first is continually clarifying what is important to us…The second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly" (Senge, 2006, p. 278). This applies to assessment because as assessment becomes more accurate, it can drive instruction. As I have stated earlier, a focus on curriculum, collaboration and results - DuFour and Eakers' (1998) three big ideas – can become a guiding coalition that underpins the necessity for the school environment to be seen as a learning organization. In this way the teacher gains Personal Mastery both individually and, collectively over time, with continuous growth, creates a learning organization that is better suited to responding than reacting. Coupling individual mastery with proficiency in working with colleagues on core values allows the educator to understand their part in the collective.

It then follows that a leader needs to create an environment within which teachers have a sense of both autonomy and collective responsibility. My own continual pursuit of Personal Mastery has always provided the foundation from which I lead others. At the age of 56, I am still trying to gain a better understanding of Personal Mastery in my world of leadership in order to best support those I serve in education, further demonstrated by the undertaking and completion of my Master's in Education. I realize that in my work as

a leader, I have to give direction and put supports in place for growth, but also autonomy should be present so that individuals can take the direction and supports provided and use their creative gifts to come up with something that will best support themselves and the common good.  As John Kotter  (2012) says of the purpose for guiding coalitions, "No one person, no matter how competent, is capable of single-handedly…developing the right vision, communicating it to vast numbers of people, eliminating all of the key obstacles, generating short term wins, leading and managing dozens of change projects, and anchoring new approaches deep in an organization's culture."  Both autonomy and collective responsibility are intertwined, and must be for the growth of the learning organization. If there is a collaborative culture where clear parameters and goals have been set out, and educators have clear reasons for what they do, then meeting together will never be wasted. It will be targeted, intentional, specific, and will all be to address the most important core value, which is that all students can learn.  As I noted in 2010, "The first value [for Personal Mastery] was forming highly functional collaborative teams. I knew the staff needed to have a common goal to work on in order for this change to occur. I knew that true staff wellness would only happen if they shifted from thinking they were independent contractors to becoming part of a team." (501B, 2010, p. 13) Not only is this an effective model between leadership and teachers, but can be the same model used between teachers and students in the classroom. I recall a conversation with a teacher on my staff in an early principalship.

> "I have no idea why you trust us so much." [she said.] And I responded, "I can't do your job, so I have to free you up to do your job…actually this tendency will increase in my leadership style instead of decreasing, for I believe in the value of the human potential, and you are one of those humans." This was the first person at [the school] to verbalize her surprise at my willingness to trust the staff to be leaders in the school...The essence of empowerment started to form within me without me being able to put language to what I was doing at the age of fourteen. The ability to see the good in people, to encourage the best in people, to want the best for people in whichever circumstance I found myself in has never wavered - from a fourteen year old to a person who found himself working "overseas in Pakistan trying to understand how to encourage people to be their best and valuing

them, believing in their potential and doing the same thing in a totally different culture." (501C, 2010, p. 2)

My own personal autonomy has been so highly refined, sharpened, and honed that I cannot now envision structuring my life and school in any other way than continuing to encourage those around me to gain their own Personal Mastery, in order to contribute to the collective good.

If the discipline of Mastery is working for the individual and the leader feels the effect, and everyone involved feels it, then the result is that those who the leader is serving - by education standards students and teachers – will be the benefactors. In an example from an earlier principalship, I wrote,

> …As a result of every staff member being involved in this work, they owned the results; they no longer saw a separation between the 'admin' and the teacher, but rather saw themselves as valued members of a team. The value then created internal accountability to one another as they began to rely on each another and moved from independence to interdependence. (501B, 2010, p. 15)

An example from an early principalship reveals the results of this focus:

> One of these teachers came to me at the end of the day excited about what had just happened in her previous class…During one class a mostly belligerent student…asked the age old question—"Why do we need to learn this?" Instead of being defensive…the teacher was able to answer the question in a straight forward manner not attempting to avoid this challenge but believe [the student] really wanted an answer. Her response was clear, concise, and rife with examples…the student simply nodded, said thanks and began the work process. The teacher came into my office so excited exclaiming that because I had given the teachers the gift of time to empower them in their understanding of curricular objectives, she in turn was able to do the same for her students. By creating a sense of wonder in the teachers, they were able to do the same for reluctant learners and behaviour issues virtually vanished from the classrooms. The principal, the teachers and the students felt like they all owned the process of learning and acted accordingly. The teacher thanked me and this became a watershed for her and her colleagues in this continuum of learning. (503C, 2009, pp.10-11)

As this example demonstrates, the practice of Personal Mastery is the collective belief that teachers and students alike can be working together in the learning organization, and not in opposition to one another. As previously stated in the section on Systems Thinking, Senge (2006) believes that the only way to see transformational change in any environment is by creating a learning organization; "And learning organizations are not possible unless they have people at every level who practice [Personal Mastery]" (p. 279).

The unintended consequence of a learning organization is the intense desire of the individual to be part of a team. In one of my schools, I had a teacher who was about to retire say to me, "I've never worked so hard for a principal in my entire life." When I said, "Why? I haven't told you what you must do." She responded, "No, but you gave us a reason for why we are doing what we do and therefore we have to work hard to understand that the students are grasping the material. I got away from just turning another page in the textbook or merely trying to cover curriculum. I now see that I had students in my class that needed to learn the material and it was my responsibility to figure out how to put that possibility within their reach. We worked hard in our collaborative groups to come up with a solution that would make the learning accessible for the students."

This example reveals not only the need for Personal Mastery, but also the desire from the individual educator to practice Personal Mastery in order to not let the team down. Furthermore, Personal Mastery can become a means of powerful support for data management, allowing educators to have real-time information to adjust their practice appropriately to best meet the learning needs of their students. This practice allows teachers to constantly improve how they deliver or teach the curriculum based on how students will interpret it. In essence, if that environment can be created in a school amongst educators, a positive peer culture is formed where individuals do everything they can to encourage each other to achieve the goal that all students will learn. "People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never "arrive"…But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their

ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident"
(Senge, 2006, p. 280).

**Theme 4: Mental models**

Mental models is the fourth theme that was noted in my data. Mental Models can either inhibit or enhance growth. Mental Models determine our actions. Why are mental models so powerful in affecting what we do? In part, because they affect what we see. Two people with different mental models can observe the same event and describe it differently, because they've looked at different details and made different interpretations." (Senge, 2006, p. 347) Mental Models are firmly held thought processes that are challenged to entertain anything that might fall outside of a familiar and well-exercised existing picture of the world. A mental model, akin to Bourdieu's (1978) habitus and consisting of values, beliefs and the way things are done in a culture, dictates what actions will follow. What is perceived directs the action one will take.

> Learning is eventually always about action, and one basic reflective skill involves using gaps between what we say and what we do as a vehicle for becoming more aware. For example, I may profess (an espoused theory) that people are basically trustworthy. But I never lend friends money and jealously guard all my possessions. Obviously, my theory-in-use, my deeper mental model, differs from my espoused theory. (Senge, 2006, p. 375)

> Growth and change in Mental Models can occur by 1) unearthing deeply held beliefs that govern behavior, 2) creating an environment that fosters two-way communication in a forum through inquiry and dialogue, and 3) sharing opposing views in this forum creates a tension between espoused theories and theories-in-use, which allows a learning organization to continually examine their Mental Models.

> So the first question to pose when facing a gap between espoused theory and a theory-in-use is "Do I really value the espoused theory?" "Is it really part of my vision?" If there is no commitment to the espoused theory, then the gap does not represent the tension between reality and my vision but between reality and a view I advance (perhaps because of how it will make me look to others). (Senge, 2006, p. 376)

What I've done in Education is realize which Mental Models I want to challenge in my role as a principal. As a student, the thing I detested - and many people in my experience feel the same way – was the teachers who provided the information and expected the students to figure it out on their own, holding onto some secret key to unlock the knowledge and keeping the students guessing. The teachers that I remember as having a profound impact were the ones who both held me accountable and also walked beside me, encouraging and challenging me to work hard and believe that I could understand the material. The Mental Model that I most wanted to challenge was the theory-in-use that I perceived was held by teachers: the us vs. them mentality. Whether it was an "administration vs. teachers" or a "teachers vs. students" attitude, I wanted to create a learning organization that realized it was the learners vs. the curriculum, where every learner – whether administrator, teacher or student – were all working together to create a learning organization. Senior administration from the Edmonton Public School Board held a meeting in which a principal shared this statement: "it is not the teacher and the curriculum vs. the student, it is the teacher and the student vs. the curriculum." More specifically, the teacher and the student work together to scaffold the knowledge necessary to master curricular objectives. This type of attitude is what I believed would create a positive, productive and happy learning environment. Although the theory I've just described is very simple, the process of changing Mental Models is complex, time consuming and necessitates the centrality of creating a positive culture with the dual tension between accountability and support, with all players seeing themselves as learners. I have realized in my journey – whether as a hockey coach, missionary, businessman, teacher or principal – that it is necessary to form this communication base to foster inquiry and dialogue creating the opportunity to challenge existing Mental Models. As expressed by Senge, (2006) "Until the gap between my espoused theory and my current behavior is recognized, no learning can occur" (p. 376).

A positive school culture is characterized by accountability of all members of the community, recognition of the tension between accountability and support, belief that all stakeholders are learners within an organization, trust that all stakeholders will feel

confident that their ideas and input will be received and accepted, and agreement upon core values of the learning organization itself.

> It's important to note that the goal in practicing the discipline of mental models is not necessarily agreement or convergence. Many mental models can exist at once. Some models may disagree. All of them need to be considered and tested against situations that come up. This requires an organizational "commitment to the truth," which is an outgrowth of personal mastery. (Senge, 2006, p. 397)

Having documented my experiences as a principal in several schools, I was able to reflect upon how I enacted the development of a positive school culture. The following lengthy description reveals how I developed accountability of all members of the community, provided support to stakeholders or learners (teachers, students, administration) so that they would feel confident that their ideas and input would be received and accepted, and helped to establish a shared core of values for the learning organization (school) itself.

> In an early principalship, prior to the start of the school year as a new principal, I contacted my staff and asked them during the summer to drop in to the office and see me. I told them I would be in the office beginning mid-August and would look forward to informal conversations about what they were hoping to see from the "new guy." Many staff took advantage of this, introducing themselves and sharing some of the good, the bad and the ugly about the school. I kept anecdotal records from these conversations and referred to this data at our first staff meeting together. I asked those who did not have a chance to meet me, to do the same and share their responses with me anonymously. After compiling this information, I read out the top three things they wanted; a culture of diligence where students did their work and were engaged in learning without fighting the teachers emotionally and verbally on a daily basis, a more positive environment, and to procure modern technology as soon as possible. (501D, 2008, pp. 9-10)

I realized that responding to their needs alone would not suffice. I also had a responsibility to stretch or perturb them. As Maturana (1974) states,

> A problem is a question. A question is a perturbation that the questioned system must compensate for by generating a conduct that satisfies certain criteria

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specified in the same domain as the perturbation. Therefore, to solve a problem is to answer a question in the same domain in which it is asked. (p. 15)

I knew I needed to act on these suggestions but still start the process of creating new experiences to perturb them enough to slightly knock them out of equilibrium in order to see movement up the transformational staircase of positive change. At this same staff meeting I presented the idea that we all need to be on the same page and asked them if they had ever seen the School Plan. Only a select few had been invited to talk about it, but they never saw the finished product. I presented this plan to them via PowerPoint and then gave them a copy to keep in their files. I told them I was not smart enough to have all the answers and did not want this job if everyone thought I had to think of everything. I know this perturbed some of the older staff members as they had a model of leadership in their heads, which had the administration as separate from the teachers and believed the principal was to make the majority of decisions. It became very apparent at our first meeting when I had asked for feedback there were a few teachers who felt like they represented the entire staff.

It was after that meeting I introduced the idea of consensus and began using the "fist of fives" [as presented by DuFour and Eakers in their book entitled Professional Learning Communities at Work] (1998). In this method after discussion has been heard from the group on ideas presented, the opportunity to vote is afforded to staff, five fingers meaning yahoo, I agree wholeheartedly, when can we get started, three fingers meant ambivalence, to a fist meaning I am not convinced and want no part of this. The most critical part of this process is for everybody to look around at the group while voting. A new culture of consensus was created. No longer did they just have to follow the person who spoke the loudest. I could build consensus from the group to think alike (share a set of values) and make decisions that would be the best for our students. Once I established this protocol, I explained that I would not allow debate on various topics to go on forever, but would use the "fist of fives" so that we could move forward quickly and create change (because of consensus not because of loud talkers or staff bullies). [I use this protocol to this day and if I ever have difficulty deciding on what to do, I use the consensus model with staff as a guide to help

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make decisions.] The principal has veto power on issues, so I do not give away my leadership; in fact the opposite occurred, as people were empowered, they felt their voice was being heard and contributions to the group increased. (501D, 2008, pp. 9-10)

Once we addressed those things together and they gained confidence that I was paying attention to what truly mattered to them, then I had the platform to start challenging their mental models and was able to create a forum for effectively doing so. I like to say I developed a way of leading that was dialogue-based and inquiry-based, similar to the TV character Columbo who would stick up his pointer finger, squint and say "I just have one more question…" This is what I did with my staff; they trusted that I didn't have an agenda to crush their ideas but rather desired to create a learning organization where we would not be afraid to collectively analyze what we did in our practice.

Mental models can be positive and they can be negative. They can motivate or paralyze. They can also be changed, especially through inquiry and dialogue.

[It] has been said that if Rip Van Winkle woke from a hundred year sleep and was taken to a hospital, he would not recognize it because of all the changes. However, if he went to a school, he would recognize them, as most classrooms operate the same way they did a hundred years ago. Now, I do not have proof to back these claims, but I have my own experience of being a student going through the school system, becoming a teacher and then becoming a principal. In June of 1985 I left the teaching profession to work overseas [as a missionary]. I returned to teaching full time in 1992 and was still in step with teaching practices, realizing nothing significant had taken place in my absence. In every school I taught in, it seemed that there were good teachers who seemed to be able to motivate their students and others who intimidated, berated and seemed to not enjoy what they were doing. It was in this backdrop that I left teaching again to pursue business ventures. Once more, I returned after a six-month hiatus, but this time I was back in an administrative capacity. This was the start of my journey wondering about school reform and if it was possible to do in a systemic way. (501D, 2008, p. 4)

Knowledge of mental models and how to change them have helped in school transformation, as another earlier reflection confirms:

> Growth should be the thing that takes people out of their comfort zone, creating a perturbation in their world to create disequilibrium. And this challenge should take place with sufficient support to yield growth. Once this is created and people begin to change their thinking, then new ideas can begin to form, resulting in transformation. Once the new thought patterns emerge and people see reward from the changes, they begin to accept the notion that a change in practice can occur. (501B, 2010, p. 35)

Perturbation is the process of challenging a person's firmly held belief and beginning the process of potential change. Senge (2006) best describes Mental Models as those things that are the underlying reasons for why we as humans do what we do. Senge (2006) indicates that "new insights fail to get put into practice because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting" (p. 345). And so, not only was it important to challenge the mental models of the staff, but also of the students – further highlighting the need for all the learners in the school to have a collective purpose.

> I knew the way to create change was to show the students that I cared and interacted with them as often as I could. I would visit classrooms, be visible in the halls, talk to students as often as I was able. I met them going to classes, coming from the bathroom, getting things from their lockers and being as visible as humanly possible. … If I noticed people being rude to some other student I would intervene gently but firmly. If I heard someone swear I would challenge them to think about who is listening when they are not looking. If I had a suspicion that certain classes had students in them who were rude to teachers often, I would sit in their class and make my presence known. If I caught students doing the right thing, I would make a big deal of it. I might even take them to my office and call their parents letting them know how proud of their son/daughter they should be. I kept this up throughout the year. I ended up suspending many students who were rude to teachers and ultimately I took two boys to expulsion and they were asked to never return to [the school]. These were proud boys who had a rather tough

demeanour and I had asked teachers to keep files on them, giving them multiple chances to change their ways. Ultimately, I had them both expelled and this sent a message to the entire student body (more importantly to teachers) that we would have a culture of diligence, no longer could students be rude to teachers without consequences and I started to bring in computer equipment. The staff soon realized that I was walking my talk and their trust in me increased daily as they expressed verbally how appreciative they were for me taking action on specific items that were important to them. The students and staff saw me daily either in classes, in the halls, outside, or they could even find me chatting to students off of school property at lunch. I wanted everyone to know I was serious about change and there were behaviours I would not tolerate and would do my best to eradicate. This engendered courage in staff members and they were willing to model the same behaviours in every corner of the building. This also did the same for those students who were previously intimidated by certain student behaviour, they realized it was O.K. to do the right thing and the culture snowballed into a positive one in less than a year. My job was to make sure the culture was a positive one and I did everything within my power to acknowledge every person in the building for adding to this positive culture. (501D, 2008, pp. 9-10)

As Tripp (1993) said "The vast majority of critical incidents...are not at all dramatic or obvious: they are mostly straight forward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis." (pp.24-25) As part of this autobiographical research, I recognize that every day my seemingly innocuous interactions with teachers, students, parents and the community have been essential to produce the environment in which connections are made, allowing me to use inquiry and dialogue to lead. By interacting in a variety of ways, a variety of times with a variety of people, commonplace events became the critical mass that could challenge the theories-in-use amongst all stakeholders of the learning organization.  The examples I have shared above reveal how the use of critical incidents

were essential for breaking down the barriers and building up the trust of the staff to desire to be involved in a learning organization where everyone had a voice. In the above examples, the staff was each deemed important regardless of their currently held Mental Model, which may have been different from the Model I desired to inculcate as the principal. In my business ventures, I heard a speaker at a conference say, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still"; and, in my work as a missionary I heard it said "What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say". According to Hofstede, (1991)

> Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking; feeling; and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime. Much of it has been acquired in early childhood, because at that time a person is most susceptible to learning and assimilating. As soon as certain patterns of thinking, feeling and acting have established themselves within a person's mind, [they] must unlearn these before being able to learn something different; and unlearning is more difficult than learning for the first time. (p. 4)

By being aware that the difference between espoused theories and theories-in-use could create tension between staff, leading to lack of communication and misunderstandings, I was motivated to get to the point of inquiry and dialogue with staff. The sooner this could be accomplished, the sooner a safe environment could be established.  For me a safe environment is one in which opposing views can be held and critically reviewed through a process of inquiry and dialogue. Thereby, new Mental Models could be cultivated and come in line with the shared vision, a concept I will discuss in the next section of this autobiographical research project.

A positive culture can be built when those who are decision makers or in leadership positions have earned the respect and right to ask questions of their team and vice-versa. By looking at and analyzing existing Mental Models and working together on a common idea of where the group would like to go, then what occurs is that the group is able to challenge the status quo, including their own espoused theories. Other aspects of this paper have discussed that in a learning organization individuals adapt and change as needed. Now, having said that, I fully acknowledge that there are parts of the education

system that are never going to change and some that may never change in my lifetime, but there are some things that need to be challenged, analyzed differently and looked at with different perspective.

**Theme 5: Shared vision**

The next theme that surfaced in my data matches Senge's fourth discipline of a shared vision. Simply defined, a Shared Vision is a set of agreed upon goals; everybody on a team agrees that these are goals they can run towards. Although valid, elements that don't fit into the agreed-upon goals and vision are cast aside and do not receive the focus of the group's attention:

> A shared vision is not an idea…It is, rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further - it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person - then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision…Shared vision is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning. While adaptive learning is possible without vision, generative learning occurs only when people are striving to accomplish something that matters deeply to them. (Senge, 2006, pp.405- 406)

In each school where I have been principal, I have entered a negative environment where committed teachers have been affected by difficult circumstances – mostly outside of their control. These circumstances can contribute to various levels and degrees of toxicity that need to be corrected in order to gain traction to create a positive learning organization. Having said that, I believe that in every school in Alberta and around the world teachers have the intention and the desire to do the very best they can, but because teachers are working more and more as individual contractors, they do not see their contributions as valuable to the overall health of the learning organization. This is a consequence of not developing a shared vision. As a principal,

> I began to piece the puzzle together as to what needed to happen in order for any semblance of order to return to this broken process. I needed [staff] to quit talking

as if there was an us and them and begin to realize how it was essential for all parties to work side by each toward a common goal…My staff agreed and moved far away from the opinions and distractions of [their previous experience to] focus on what we were there to do and that was to educate the children…No more would conjecture, guessing and inaccurate mind reading lead to hurt feelings... We would respect each other and start fresh…Teachers need to be able to work in an environment where they feel valued, honoured and trusted…Students need to see the adults in their world moving in the same direction and doing it with a positive upbeat approach. The interaction within this environment can be explained by Systems Thinking and the importance of how this all interacts and influences one another. As our biological ecosystem seamlessly interacts all living creatures within this system are able to function interdependently and independently when necessary. If the air is polluted, or some other ecological disaster occurs we see this system greatly affected. In fact certain aspects can be destroyed. The same holds true of how people, structures and processes work together. I can say the system [in prior schools] has had its own ecological disaster in that the structure and how it processes daily activities have been severely damaged. The mistrust is palpable, the tension is real and the system is broken…I [make] it clear that no longer are we operating as a splintered group…Here is where the leader needs to impose their will and force people to at least stop the verbal harassment to mitigate the hurt feelings and slow down the flood of negativity that can result. This message I have made loud and clear to the [leadership], to my staff, to my students and any parents who bring up something negative. I am consistent in this and relentless in my application. (502A, 2012, p. 1)

The central feature of creating a Shared Vision is dialogue that needs to take place between the leadership team and myself; additionally, dialogue must take place between the leadership team and the teachers, impacting how they dialogue with students in the classroom. As a teacher, I strongly disliked staff meetings. It seemed like a waste of time as items were discussed that seemed to have already been decided by the administration

and meetings would often be hijacked by teachers who were not open to change, despised top down authoritarian injunctions and basically just wanted to be left alone. The classroom was their kingdom and the only interaction or collaboration would be some passing conversation in a staff room.  Typical staff meetings would include plenty of top-down directives and not a lot of connecting with the material and that was the only way that leadership would be provided. In my experience, most teachers went to the meetings and were polite, nodded their heads as if to comply and continue to do what they had always done (I was one of them). But there were some individuals within that environment who questioned the thoughts and decisions of the leader, and came across as being oppositional because there wasn't a forum for inquiry and dialogue to occur. As a result, people felt like things were being done to them. Nobody likes feeling that things are being done to them, especially if they are committed to creating a learning organization but feel helpless as to how to do so.

Inquiry and dialogue can occur freely and without fear in an environment where mockery or dismissal are discouraged, and respect for the opinions of others – even amidst disagreement – is readily encouraged.  Focused and intentional dialogue allows administration, teachers and students to be a part of the learning organization. Dialogue and inquiry are the means by which values are defined by the collective. As a teacher, I never wanted to be a suit – or in a role of administration – as I felt administrators were aloof, not connected with my classroom, and not interested in supporting me in my role as a teacher. I can count on one hand any principals in my teaching career who desired to be collaborative, supportive and engaged. I determined in my being that should I ever become a principal I would never forget what it was like to be a teacher, a decision that later became a strong core value, and I have maintained this axiom to this day. I do not expect my staff to do anything that I am not willing to do to support them. Because my core value was to create interdependence, with me being a part of the process, I had to integrate my role as an administrator into their roles as teachers. I did not see the two as mutually exclusive, and as such, set a course to engage staff in the creation of a Shared Vision to drive our learning organization. But, as Senge (2006) indicates, "Building shared vision is actually only one piece of a larger activity: developing the governing ideas for the enterprise, its vision, purpose or mission, and core values. A vision not

consistent with values that people live by day by day will not only fail to inspire genuine enthusiasm, it will often foster outright cynicism…[Values] describe how the [learning organization] wants life to be on a day-to-day basis, while pursuing the vision." (p. 441)

In an earlier paper, I reference this commitment to interdependence by the creation of a:

> highly functional collaborative culture. By continuously trying to improve as a collective, using action research as a method of analysis, reflective educational practitioners are created; furthermore, professionalism can be exercised as one interacts with the curriculum to make it living and relevant to the student. Highly functional collaborative teams are not created by accident. They are prescriptions for success in this area through the establishment of agreed upon norms between staff members. They must learn how to function as a team…[and] create a form of action research where learning becomes the focus, not necessarily the teaching. Having said that learning is the focus, teachers also share ideas of how to best share the information with their students. They are able to discuss which modalities are best, how to differentiate instruction, consistently analyze data from formative and summative assessments and determine how students are getting along in their understanding. In this way, the staff become diagnostic collaborative specialists, harnessing the power of synergy and becoming synchronistic in their daily practice. (503A, 2009, p. 3)

Shared Vision is what can create this dynamic environment as the learning organization charges forward. This process began in my schools where I was principal when:

> [we] began to form our collaborative teams and I had them set their norms for each department. I include an example in point form to help understand why this was so important: I began with department heads sharing past negative experience(s) they have had serving on a team or committee and to identify a specific behavior that prevented the group from being effective: for example, whining and complaining, arriving late and leaving early, being disengaged

during the meetings and so on. From this [dialogue] they created a positive model which helped the teams become highly functional.

- We will maintain a positive tone at our meetings.
- We will not complain about a problem unless we can offer a solution.
- We will begin and end our meetings on time and stay fully engaged throughout each meeting.
- We will contribute equally to the workload of this team.
- We will listen respectfully and consider matters from another's perspective.

Each time a collaborative team met, they set an agenda, kept minutes which were shared with me and became a very efficient…[way of]...working together on a weekly basis. They came together once a month to share with all staff to make sure each person was accountable for this initial work…Teachers were allowed to set aside entire days to work on this material. At first this was onerous and the staff members were not clear how to do the work. Each department had varying degrees of success…The immediate result was clarity for staff members…I began to hear my words duplicated in staff members as they spoke with other teachers, each other or to their students…Collective inquiry is how we [worked]. Teachers take advantage of the resources made available to take time away from the classroom as they deem necessary to work in collaborative groups on a variety of subjects…Time is always set aside for teachers to share with each other…allowing each teacher to partake in new knowledge. My staff was not expected to hold long meetings after school to achieve our objectives; I used the money to provide time and support to enhance these initiatives. As a result, teachers felt valued and understood. This led to mutual trust and was the catalyst for very high level productive meetings, translating into positive teaching and learning environments as teachers share each other's burden. They began to be mutually accountable to each other realizing they could share the workload, and in working interdependently they create a synergy for positive change I could never dictate as a principal. [This] creates a cycle of professional growth as they

challenge ideas or are challenged to re-think their previous thoughts! (501D, 2008, pp. 14-19)

This entire process of inquiry and dialogue in Shared Vision allows for the opportunity to discuss the strengths already present within the group and not fear the creative tension that comes from evaluating the juxtaposition of the variously held positions on the vision – it is these discussions, and the atmosphere in which they take place, that help to move the group in one direction.

> Shared vision fosters risk and experimentation. When people are immersed in a vision, they often don't know how to do it. They run an experiment. They change direction and run another experiment. Everything is an experiment, but there is no ambiguity. It's perfectly clear why they are doing what they are doing. People aren't saying "Give me a guarantee that it will work." Everybody knows that there is no guarantee. But the people are committed nonetheless. (Senge, 2006, p. 413)

It was important to me that my teachers experience this process of giving and taking, experimenting, making mistakes and learning from them in a supportive learning environment.

As this process was implemented over time, change in the environment became apparent. In an early reflection on the topic of shared vision, I wrote:

> Because of my unconscious (taken for granted and well developed) competence in building relationships by acknowledging people and validating them daily, they are willing to move with me as I present ideas to them. They will change because the environment created is a positive one and the seeds of ideas can grow and flourish because the culture is ripe and ready for this to occur. One of our people from central office was at [my school] and was amazed at how polite our students were and how she could sense the energy and welcoming nature of the students. She clearly stated that it was because of my warmth and clarity of vision that the school functions as it does. (501B, 2010, p.11)

At that time in the journey of the school, the intentionally focused and timely discussions between the leadership team and myself, regular teachers and students were making a difference in their understanding of the shared vision, and the outflow was consistent

from all groups involved.  That this perspective was shared and modeled by others is supported by a recent public blog posting by a former member of my staff:

> The behind the scenes but equally important member of our team was our principal; our champion, Al Lowrie. He believed that we could achieve great things, and he fought to take any obstacles out of our way so that we could barrel ahead. He strummed each of our strengths and personal qualities, and wove our melodies into a masterpiece. We called him our fearless leader, although I'm not sure 5 years ago we could have put our finger on why we thought that. As I spend time now in my career looking at qualities of leaders and defining my own leadership style, I recognize that he was indeed just that. He had no fear we could fail him. It didn't matter what proposal we came up with, he never said "no". He may have asked "how", he might have asked "why", but never "no". His absolute confidence in [his] teachers gave us confidence in ourselves. His faith in us was absolute that we would ALWAYS do the best thing for kids. His leadership was to make us internally accountable to each other, not just to him, and this was far stronger motivation than any evaluation. (Copeman, 2013)

Vision allows teachers formerly working in isolation to recognize the value of working collectively; then a highly charged, vision-filled, dynamic and continually improving learning organization can be the result.

**Theme 6: Team learning**

The five themes previously discussed are grassroots in nature and all contribute to a functioning learning organization. Team learning can only be put in place after the other five components have been addressed at some level, because one step leads to the next. The process does not involve perfecting one discipline before moving to the next, but rather allowing components to interplay organically within a safe, nurturing environment – or, as Senge would say, exercising the fifth discipline. Team learning is something "other" – that is, something that cannot be scripted by top-down initiatives without the engagement of all members of the team working synergistically of their own volition.

In team learning we see a commitment to and an enrollment of others in the vision, and the vision begins to guide how the team operates. I clearly remember in one of my earlier principalships saying to four of my staff members, "You are writing an amazing story right now and you don't even know it. I want you to pay attention to the things we are doing at this school which are definitely cutting edge." Even though I said those words, it was not until I studied Senge and his concept of team learning that I realized how cryptic my words were in light of the culture that was created where learning was the norm, creativity was the air we breathed, and the willingness to fail forward was the *modus operandi* of the culture. I could never have composed the type of metaphorical jazz music that began to play in the halls, the classrooms, and on the playground of this school. "Jazz musicians know about alignment. There is a phrase in jazz, "being in the groove," that suggests the state when an ensemble "plays as one" (Senge, 2006, p. 460). An important concept in team learning is that when it operates like jazz and team members are in the groove, their collective IQ is functionally higher than that of any individual; this produces a team that defies explanation and can be difficult to replicate. As demonstrated in Figure 2 below (Senge, 2006, p. 460), dialogue within the collective efficacy of the group is essential and plays a central role in producing a positive, highly functioning learning organization.

> Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the discipline of developing shared vision. It also builds on personal mastery, for talented teams are made up of talented individuals. But shared vision and talent are not enough. The world is full of teams of talented individuals who share a vision for a while, yet fail to learn. (Senge, 2006, p. 461)
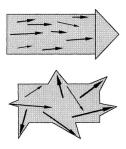


Figure 2: Shared vision and team learning (Senge, 2006, p. 460)

This same school three years previously had a negative reputation.

> To only make linear changes will not produce the desire effect for an entire organization and this will result in only isolated growth for certain staff…A leader must understand the multidimensionality of change and set about to create the culture which will accept change. Many great ideas have crashed on the rocks of cynicism and never got past the first stage of development. I knew as a leader this must not happen and it was incumbent upon me to create the positive environment. Prior to my arrival at [the school], I asked anyone who knew anything about the school what the problems were. I received answers like no spirit, disjointed, people do not work as a team and students are not very nice. Substitute teachers did not like coming to [the school] and the overall sense was that it did not have a positive school culture. I was informed that the students were rude, disrespectful to guests and made life difficult for several teachers. Upon hearing all this, I knew I had to change the culture and establish boundaries for students and teachers to operate within…[I] had been in the profession long enough to know if the culture was negative with students being under the impression they could be rude to adults and did not have to listen to teachers, I knew the change in student achievement and overall attitudes would never happen. I knew we had to make a systems change. (501D, 2008, p. 8)

Three years later at the same school as mentioned above, we hosted an annual talent show, allowing students to display their talents in multiple ways. Teachers in classrooms encouraged the students to refer and act according to the culture that had been co-created by staff, students and parents over that three-year period. The event was promoted and talked about in connection with the culture we wanted to portray. The following anecdote reveals the natural outward progression of an inward cultural shift in the school. During the talent show, students were encouraged to be positive participants, booing was not allowed and students were expected to treat all performers with respect – this was not an expectation specific to the talent show; however, it was indeed the nature of the culture we had all created. It was our "groove". One incident in particular simply highlighted this fact to all who observed the following scenario. Three girls in grade 7 were singing a

song, when they could suddenly no longer hear their own music and so they began to sing off key. There was a time when it became obvious that these girls did not know what to do next and slowly began to quit singing. At this point the crowd could have booed and/or laughed but a beautiful thing happened instead. Several girls in the front row knew the song these three girls were trying to sing and slowly began to sing the words with them. The crowd picked up on the situation and a wave went over the entire audience as they began to sing with the girls; the girls on the stage could now hear the audience and began to sing with real fervor, emboldened by hearing the words and knowing that the audience was not mocking them, but rather encouraging them in the moment. I was in the back witnessing the entire event and knew that something special had just taken place. When they were done, the entire crowd stood up and gave them a standing ovation. At that pivotal moment, I felt the crowd was truly applauding themselves as a collective for participating in a culture of kindness, acceptance and belonging which each person – students and teachers - had helped to foster.  A parent who was considering bringing her child to the school was in the audience that day and came to me with tears in her eyes, saying this was the type of safe environment that she wanted her child with special needs to be a part of. The child herself said, "In my old school, they would have booed those girls, but instead they encouraged and cheered them".

The point of these examples – and there are many, many more which occurred on a daily basis and in a variety of situations – is to underscore the type of beautiful music that can play in any type of culture if the components of the fifth discipline are adhered to with courage, patience, integrity and intentionality. As a team works on their individual mastery and corporate mastery, checks to see what mental models are in play and as shared vision is refined and honed - all taking place within systems thinking and treated as disciplines - the result is a crescendo of lives changed through the process of dialogue and meaning-making that is true to the ideals of the learning organization. As this form of interpersonal and interdependent action is perpetuated and enhanced, the result is a synchronistic and powerful culture that envelopes all who come in contact with it. It is not a panacea with an absence of mistakes, but rather it is a culture that embraces failure and success, not as something to dwell upon but as something that becomes instructive for forward movement.

By analyzing the failures and successes through dialogue, the learning organization can move forward together. This type of momentum is not an accident. It doesn't just happen. Team learning is the result of applying proven principles in order that a dynamic transformational learning organization can evolve. Senge (2006) goes on to describe the importance of dialogue in team learning;

> In dialogue…a group accesses a larger "pool of common meaning," which cannot be accessed individually. "The whole organizes the parts," rather than trying to pull the parts into a whole…"A new kind of mind begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning…People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change." (p. 473)

Because dialogue in team learning creates a pool of common meaning, a higher purpose can then be formed, as teachers do not have to deal with the banal and negative behavior that seeks to sabotage a powerful learning organization. With clear expectations and an over-arching culture that prescribes action, the culture will not tolerate those things that are in opposition to an agreed upon shared vision and the ongoing process of team learning. When team learning is active and operating seamlessly, the environment often amazes those who come into this milieu from outside.

> I was presented a Team Canada sweater, personally autographed by Ryan Smyth, dubbed "Team Canada" by his teammates and the media. This was a gift given to me [one year] on the last day of school…by a member of my staff...The teacher who presented this to me had been a teacher in difficulty and had bounced around from assignment to assignment, never given the opportunity to prove he deserved to be a regular contributing member of a staff. He had been an itinerant substitute teacher for several years, never able to shake the stigma of one particular bad year in a school that he left suddenly on a stress leave. I had one teacher who had to leave for medical reasons (hip replacement surgery) in mid-September and I needed someone to come in and take over her position. It was in this context that he became part of my staff. He was immediately surrounded by caring, professional colleagues who were more than willing to include him on their

collaborative teams. He did not have to work in isolation but had valuable input from colleagues on a daily basis, which unbeknownst to me was something he had not experienced over the previous several years of his career including the year he left suddenly on stress leave. He grew stronger as the year progressed and became a valuable team member of our staff and thanked me several times for the opportunity and for taking a chance on him. The day he presented me the jersey was a very emotional day for him and he had thought long and hard about giving me something that would represent how he felt about me. He told me I reminded him of Ryan Smyth because I worked very hard at my job, believe very strongly in the collaborative or teamwork philosophy and deserve to be recognized as a champion in my own right. He stated I knew how to be the major contributor in creating a championship team and he wanted to acknowledge this by giving me this autographed jersey. Little did he know of my background in hockey, and how this gift would be especially kept as meaningful…I was pleasantly surprised by this gift and its significance for me never sunk in until I was asked to bring a personal artifact to [a graduate class]...This immediately became a signifier of a lifetime of desiring to raise others up, helping them to be the best they could be in any school subject I taught, teams I coached, or helping colleagues work through issues they may have had in pedagogy or in classroom management. A captain of a hockey team (especially Team Canada) should be self-sacrificing, a hard worker, a role model and someone who not only thought about how they could be their best, but how to encourage others to also become their best and contribute together for a worthwhile purpose. (503A, 2009, pp. 4-5)

The results of this culture of team learning are best described by an outside observer, as in the following piece in the *Orange Magazine* – a University of Alberta publication – wherein Dr. Olenka Bilash, a professor in Secondary Education, provides her observations of one of the schools where I was principal, a school with:

…a shared vision where relationships, respect, responsibility and empathy are a priority. Staff and students alike feel empowered, encouraged and comfortable exploring new ways of doing things without fear of failure or of being rebuked.

Without a shared vision teachers tend to keep what they are doing a secret, preventing others from learning from their successes and failures. A collaborative teaching culture is the reason [the school] is so successful, but it wouldn't exist if [the leadership] didn't live the vision, contribute to the learning, believe in the potential of people and provide the space and the resources for teachers to improve and share in the important decisions. (Mowat, 2009, p. 10)

In the same article, I am quoted saying that "In order to have a collaborative culture the learning must be collaborative as well, and this is why we synchronize our professional development by going in groups." Dr. Bilash further explains, "Common PD experiences provide the teachers at [the school] with a shared understanding and language for deeper discussions, which create support for change, which in turn create a community that ensures the momentum of learning and change continues" (Mowat, 2009, p.10).

Going forward in this paper, it is necessary to understand that the bedrock of the learning organization and the ensuing transformational educational system is the formation of transformational relationships; these relationships exist between teachers and administrators, administrators and students, teachers and students, teachers and parents, and administrators and parents. It is important to remove arbitrary walls – imagined or real - that inhibit true dialogue in these relationships, helping each person see that s/he is an important contributing member of the learning organization, regardless of her/his position. To illustrate the importance of transformational leadership in this process, I will be elaborating on the importance of critical incidents within the mundane and the wonder of learning in the next section.

**Theme 7: Leadership model**

Upon continued reflection I see that my leadership model consists of several key components. In addition to the five disciplines, I have integrated being true to oneself, reading, recognizing that every moment could be a critical incident for someone, empowering others, "wonder"ing about the world, noticing details, and practicing social intelligence.

**Being true to oneself.** "Knowing others is wisdom; knowing the self is enlightenment. Mastering others requires force; mastering the self requires strength" (Tao Te Ching, c.

300 BC). Part of the process in becoming a leader is being able to identify my own method of living and growing – a challenge for me to articulate, but necessary nonetheless for my own growth in Personal Mastery. To begin with, the most significant influence in my leadership style emerged after I converted to Christianity as a young man. One of the greatest teachers in the world, and one of the best leaders in the world who impacted me was Jesus Christ (his impact in history is not questioned, though many cannot seem to agree on *who* he was). A verse from the Bible that has left an impression on my life, which I learned shortly after I was introduced to Christ, is "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mathew 20:28 NIV). As a result of reading this verse and others of a similar nature – and the practical wisdom traditions of the Hebrew culture - I realized that my life had been marked by a desire to help people grow.

Even as a young child on sports teams, my desire was never to crush others with my skills, but to encourage them to constantly improve their own. I remember being ten or eleven years old and organizing a baseball team with some friends from school, volunteering my Dad as coach – unbeknownst to him. Needless to say, it was a little bit humbling when all the farm kids stayed after school at my house, waiting for my Dad to coach only to discover he wasn't even at home, but rather he was working. We would practice hard, throwing balls, but nothing ever came of it. However, it demonstrated my desire, my drive to see people be their best, to organize those around me to strive for something together. I knew that empowering people and helping others become their best was something that I believed in. I'm not sure where the desire came from, or why I believed it, but it seemed like the thing I *had* to do.

I can't say that I consciously saw it modelled in my home or in others around me, though I may have, but mostly I just felt the importance of it deep down. And so it became a way of living that was always before me. In everything I did, I set about to do it that way. For example, as a fourteen-year-old junior hockey player, I played in the Alberta Championships and my team stayed in a hotel. One night some of the other players on my team ruthlessly made fun of a waitress. I stood up for her, a person that I didn't know, and incurred the wrath and mockery of my teammates as a result because I felt deeply that what they were doing was wrong. Not only was this likely critical for her,

it was more so a critical incident (Flanagan, 1954; Tripp, 1993) in my development and in the application of my core values. These were forged through small choices that eventually galvanized into a way of living. Not only is this the way I live, it is the way I lead.

As I got older and found myself in positions of leadership, my greatest desire was to take what I knew and had learned and teach it to others. And this also came from the transformation in my life because of Christianity – another verse says, "…teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others" (Timothy 2:2, NIV). As a young man, my desire in leadership was to help others to see further, run faster and accomplish more than I had, or could ever do on my own. Later in my life, when I went to business conferences, the attitude I had about leadership, servanthood and empowering people seemed to be reflected in the wisdom of the day, which emphasized how to get people to mobilize together in one direction to accomplish the same goal. And, without any direct training, that's exactly what I was doing and what I have continued to do. My leadership model is a direct result of how I have chosen to live my life; as Shakespeare said, "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man" (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3).

**Reading**. During my eight-year sojourn into the business world, I had attended many conferences dealing with how to lead, and how to deal with people. In going to these meetings I was required to participate in a reading program and thus was exposed to a number of great resources.

> While out of teaching [for a short time] I was involved with two distinct leadership roles [as a missionary and a business owner], both involved creating change that would be long lasting and produce stability. I read many books on leadership and knew that in order to make a change in anything I had to first be the change I wanted to see. (501D, 2008, p. 5)

One of those resources was John Maxwell's (2001) book "Developing the Leader Within You", which helped me greatly in terms of trying to understand leadership. I particularly noted his statement that the lowest level of leadership is position. Many people want to get into leadership just to have a position. But if an individual is not leading in small ways in their sphere of influence, they will never lead in big ways. That was one of the

concepts that influenced me quite a bit and therefore I desired to be the best leader I could be within my home-based business and then later as I became an administrator. I never actively sought an administrative position but was recruited because others began to recognize my ability to mobilize people in my sphere of influence and they suggested that it was time for me to make it formal. I've also heard – though I can't recall the source - that if nobody is following you, you're just going for a walk. And while a walk might be good for an individual's health, it does not contribute to the health of the learning organization.

> In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve mental models – that is they are responsible for learning…Learning organizations will remain a 'good idea'…until people take a stand for building such organizations. Taking this stand is the first leadership act, the start of inspiring (literally 'to breathe life into') the vision of the learning organization. (Senge, 1990, p. 340)

**Critical incidents.** During my graduate studies, Tripp (1993) influenced me in how he explains critical incidents as things that can change someone's world; in fact, they can be the roots of transformation in any organization. My graduate supervisor Dr. Olenka Bilash once stated, "In the world, you may be just one person to someone – but to that someone, you may be the world". In our lives, we never know when this is going to happen.  Tripp (1993) says that critical incidents are:

> not 'things' which exist independently of an observer and are awaiting discovery like gold nuggets or desert islands, but like all data, critical incidents are created. Incidents happen, but critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the significance of an event. To take something as a critical incident is a value judgment we make, and the basis of that judgment is the significance we attach to the meaning of the incident. (p. 8)

In my early leadership roles, I understood that critical incidents – though I didn't have that terminology – were important in leadership. The next few stories illustrate the power of critical incidents.

**Empowering others.** My first serious foray into leadership began when I went overseas as a missionary in the late 80's. My goal was to impart what I knew to others. I met a young man in the country by the name of Abdul, and we shared and spoke daily for a six month period, discussing a vision we had. As of this paper, in 2014, there are now 22 churches that have been started, thousands of peoples' lives changed, and thousands of students are being educated because – without even knowing it, or understanding the academic verbiage for the process – I created a learning organization in a totally different culture. When I became an administrator, I applied the same principles and then found the academic lens (Senge) to explain my leadership style. This all started by empowering one person to be all he could be, recognizing the value of finding someone to pour my life into and realizing that true leadership is serving others and creating circumstances and an environment in which they can sharpen and hone their own personal mastery as described earlier in this paper.

Furthermore, in my first school as an administrator, I was responsible for making the supervision schedule. I did it and thought it was really fair, but when it was rolled out to the staff I was surprised at their response. I had never heard so much complaining about the time it would take etc. I was stunned, and they were absolutely upset about it. I stopped them all, and asked them to sit down and put the supervision schedule aside and then opened up a discussion about the nature of their response to what I had done. I said that I was surprised by their responses, and asked them to tell me what it was that led them to feel so upset. In past experiences with administration had they been merely told what they had to do, been lectured, or been excluded from the process? I encouraged them to sit down in groups and help me with the schedule so that it made sense to all involved. That was the beginning of great relationships with that group of people. This was the first of many critical incidents in which the concept of inquiry and dialogue was significant in shaping and analyzing the mental models of the group. I remember one staff member coming to me who had been there for years and saying, "You are the person

we have been waiting for." When I asked him to explain the comment, he said "we've needed someone who actually allows us to be part of the process instead of giving us tasks." I realized that I did not know how to operate any other way and told the staff member, "we are in this together." From that critical incident onward, I never had any issues with that group cooperating with me on similar matters.

**Wonder.** In addition to the importance of critical incidents, the "wonder of education" discussed by Dwayne Huebner (1999) has also formed a significant part of my leadership model, as I strongly believe in the importance of the spiritual element in learning and the importance of the individual as being created by an intelligent designer; these core values clearly explain why I treat people with the respect I do. In contrast, too often

> The educator has accepted...the logical division of the world into subjects and objects. He identifies too easily with Descartes, "I think, therefore, I am," deriving existence from thinking. But it is the encounter with the world, not as an object but as another subject existing independently of a thought, which produces the feeling of awe and wonder. We have this capacity for wonder. It is possible for us to meet this world and other subjects which make up this world and to stand face to face with them--to feel wonder, amazement, a sense of mystery. (p. 5)

I remember when I was studying education in University, we were taught not to teach values, and that it was possible to have value-less education. It was so wrong on multiple levels. I remember during my first teaching assignment the grade nine students were running roughshod over me because I was trying to follow the model I had been taught at University, wasn't using discipline techniques but was trying to be their friend without implementing my own values in classroom management. After a month of trying it this way I thought to myself, "This is ridiculous. If I carry on like this I will suffer and nothing good will happen with these students." So I began to bring my values to the light and implement classroom management strategies based on my values – that the students would not be rude to adults or their classmates, but that they would listen and participate in an orderly fashion and a respectful manner. At first, I remember many of the boys in the class were so upset with me because I began to challenge them, and they came to speak to me privately after school. I told them why I took the actions I did, expressing what I believed the appropriate roles were for themselves as students and for me as their

teacher. This process of dialogue and inquiry was a way for us to explore the mental models that they held – I walked them through the process, even though I didn't know the name for my method. This process eventually led the entire class to come in line with me, once they saw how resolved I was and how invested I was in their learning. I have found that we never know the potential of the individuals we are leading, but I believe that if we have a sense of wonder about those people, that they are made in God's image, that they are someone that needs to be given respect to, that they should be honoured, then it is pretty hard to act selfishly in any leadership role. My early teaching career demonstrates how I began applying principles that I had no name for, but which later on in my career would become very clear to me. Call it what you will, but I believe there is something in human nature that drives us to connect with one another and with the Divine. It has always been important to me that this value remains in my teaching practice and as stated earlier, has formed a key part of my leadership model. One would be hard pressed to act in one's own best interests within a leadership model formed by the core values I have described.

**Noticing detail.** *The Discipline of Noticing* by John Mason describes paying attention to details, something I realize I have always done naturally in my life whether overseas, in the business world, or as a teacher and administrator, and which I would continue to apply as a principal. When I think of my leadership style I also think of empowerment. I equip others with the tools they need to become the best they can be in whichever area of responsibility is theirs. I allow people to see that a vision that I might have is tied into a deep core value and belief in the good for the people I am involved with, and not to do them harm. I take actions along the journey to create an environment in which this can be demonstrated. Wisdom traditions found in the Hebrew culture focus largely on pragmatism as a method to uncover knowledge, rather than pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake. I have leaned toward this practical use of knowledge; knowledge that has a clear purpose and provides direction.  In my life, this translates into the fact that if something is right, I do it. My greatest strength is that I believe in people. And my greatest weakness is that I believe in people. Very few times in my life have I been let down by people I've tried to encourage. Most people get my intentions and appreciate

them, and replicate my efforts on levels I never could have imagined. That's what empowerment is to me. I simply noticed things that others didn't notice.

> At the heart of all practice lies noticing: noticing an opportunity to act appropriately. To notice an opportunity to act requires three things: being present and sensitive in the moment, having a reason to act, and having a different act come to mind….The mark of an expert is that they are sensitised to notice things which novices overlook. They have finer discernment. They make things look easy, because they have a refined sensitivity to professional situations and a rich collection of responses on which to draw…Professional development is about becoming more expert…Noticing can be developed into a disciplined contribution to any enquiry… (Mason, 2002, p. 1)

**Social intelligence.** While in Graduate School, I read a number of academic works that led me to the realization that a strong social intelligence – demonstrated in my attention to social morays - was something that had been developed in me over the years; I would notice little things that needed to be corrected where others didn't even see a problem; I was sensitive to people's feelings. I responded in practical ways – and led others to do the same – to take action, rather than waiting for something to occur that would elicit a reaction. I lead by treating everyone the same – not in terms of actions I take, but in the sense that everyone is worthy of respect and dignity.

> "Good morning how are you", I asked a mother as she was walking off campus. "Well…not good. My son was fearing coming back to school this year because he feared being isolated by other children and did not want to be mocked or ridiculed any more." "Oh dear, I said, please tell me more." As she proceeded to explain what had occurred, it became very obvious that the source of the problem had never been addressed and, my experience was screaming in my head that this needed to be addressed immediately, otherwise this situation could only worsen. I assured the mother I did not approve of this type of bullying but told her unless the root cause was attacked and all parties [were] confronted with truth, nothing would change. I explained what I had done in the past with these types of situations and how they would totally disappear…I had heard about the bullying issues and how many were left unresolved. Parents and children told me countless

stories of bullying and how this had affected their children. I knew this could be a watershed moment, so I told the mother that as soon as our conversation was over I would be speaking to all my grade six classes explaining what bullying is and how we need to eradicate this problem. I…went over to the grade six classes explaining how inappropriate bullying was and we need to stop it and that I would be taking the appropriate steps to eradicate this from [the school]. The students and teachers agreed to work on this together, but I felt like the bully would strike immediately, so I waited near the section where these classes were making myself available to the victim in case it happened that quickly. I was right; the little boy…came up to me and said, "It did not work. What you said did not work, he did it again." …I asked what the boy's name was and had the teacher find him and send him to me. I had the boys together and asked the bully what made him think he did not have to change his behavior especially 10 minutes earlier I had explained (and he was one of the students that agreed) to help stop this behavior. I challenged the bully, but then asked the victim what his role in this was and why he felt this had been going on for so long. I asked the bully if this was true. He agreed. I asked him for his perspective with the victim listening. The victim understood why they might be irritated with him and said he would be willing to change. The bully said he would not be mean any longer and said he was sorry because he would not want to be treated that way. To make this story shorter I basically employed an empathy strategy for the bully so he could see firsthand how his nastiness had been affecting this boy for several years. I also had the victim understand how his helpless victim approach encouraged this type of behavior and only served to make it worse. I also showed them how dealing with these situations on their own only served to drive wedges in their relationship and that the problem could only deteriorate further. I explained my process to the teacher, challenged the bully to put himself in the place of the victim and had him relate to situations that he had also dealt with where he was the victim. I did this all within 10 minutes after recess asking each boy to repeat what they heard the other say and to explain clearly what they understood the solution to be. I included them in the problem solving, made the problem theirs, not mine [and

expected] them to create an agreed upon solution. [An email from the mother came in to me later that day which said]: Mr. Lowrie, [our son] just got in our van after school and said "guess what I have the best news!" He told me about your talk to the class. In his own words you "did it perfectly and said all the right stuff". He also told me about the follow up conversation you had to have after with one of the boys. It meant so much to him that you did that, and that he felt comfortable enough to approach you in the hall…Thank you so much for dealing with this issue and being there for our children at school when we can't be. I can't tell you how much it means to us! (502D, 2012, pp 2-3)

In the progression of my life from a young boy organizing a baseball team to being a principal, I have lived my core values every day, the primary one being that people are created in God's image; I am given the privilege of showing love and empowering others in the best way I know how. The most important aspect of leadership is helping a person move towards creating something that is bigger than them; it is giving purpose to life and work. If people can enrol in that purpose and come to accommodate a belief system – not merely assimilate into an existing model - then they will not act in opposition to that system and the outflow is consistent results. As Frankl (1984) says,

Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run—in the long-run, I say!—success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it. (Frankl, 1984, pp. 16-17)

# PART FOUR
## Closing

My experience in the public school system in Alberta has spanned over twenty-five years, with the past thirteen years in administrative capacities. It is from the administrative portion of my educational career that comes the majority of the data in this paper; however, I do reference experiences of my youth, my time as a missionary in Pakistan and my learnings from being a business owner in Alberta. I have been an administrator within three schools, all within the same city and in the same school district. The demographics of the students across the three schools were similar, with the exception of the variations in the socio-economic status of students within one school. I was administrator in a Grades 4-9 school, a K-9 school and a K-12 school.

In this paper I used each one of Senge's five disciplines as a corner post and descriptor to advocate for schools as learning organizations and principals enacting the five disciplines. By using personal anecdotes from five years of collecting field notes, I offered concrete examples and synthesized key points that may help others as they look to create a positive learning environment in their own organization. Below I offer a synthesis of the key points in my experience and practice of leadership in the above schools and contexts as eleven tips for new or experienced leaders.

**Eleven Tips For New Or Experienced Leaders**

1. Be a reflective practitioner - It is important to pay attention to the environment in which you exist, and appreciate those who have gone before you. As a leader, it will not serve you well to cast aspersions on a previous staff's work, believing yourself to have the correct answers. A reflective practitioner learns both from their own experience and the experiences of others.

2. Make questions your friends - Ask good questions to understand the "why" as well as the "how". The "why" questions unearth the reasons for doing something, the "how" questions can reveal the intricate details necessary for completing the "why". But without the "why", you never get to the "how". Be as objective as possible in your questioning, and avoid being condemning.

3. The mundane is critical - As cited earlier, "In the world, you may be just one person to someone – but to that someone, you may be the world". Understand that little things are big things. What occurs in the mundane moments can lead to a critical incident for someone. (Personal communication with O. Bilash, July, 2014)  Paying attention to the critical incident and duplicating it elsewhere can lead to critical mass, which ultimately can create a movement. It can be said then that the process contains the secrets for the potential product.

4. To change a system you must first understand it - A leader does not make change simply for change sake. Rather, by grasping the big picture of the system in which they find themselves, a leader can more readily perceive which elements are not functioning as they should. Ultimately, a leader needs to fully engage within the system, being as much a part of it as it is a part of him/her. Without being "all-in" – or as Senge (2006) says "enrolled" - change is not possible.

5.  Unearthing a core purpose can create a courageous leader - When leaders know the solid base from which they operate (a function of personal mastery), making forays into new territory is possible, and whether they succeed or fail on the journey, they will ultimately not lose their way.

6. Learn to turn the mirror inward and teach others to do the same - This will "unearth our internal pictures of the world [mental models], bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny" (Senge, 2006, p. 36). Once this occurs it can be repeated as needed, can be changed as required and allows individual learning to intertwine with organizational learning.

7. Galvanize a shared vision with those you lead - "The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment and enrollment, rather than compliance" (Senge, 2006, p. 38). Without group adherence, a vision statement is just a collection of words on a piece of paper.

8. Develop a desire to utilize dialogue in your relationships - Through dialogue (which includes listening to one another), we can understand what undermines the growth of a learning organization, which mental models are limiting change, and which ones are useful as catalysts for change. If I cannot repeat what someone has said to me, then true dialogue has not occurred, as defined by Senge.

9. Value each individual on the team - The whole is only as strong as its weakest component. In the game of chess, pawns are as important as the Queen. The pawns don't have as much power as the Queen, but their individual moves – performed correctly as a collective – can set up the other more powerful pieces to win the game. Understand that each person has something to contribute and make it a goal to find out what that something is.

10. A leader is not better than those they lead - A leader is who they are *because* of whom they lead. A leader's goal should be to empower those they work with to be the best they can be, and as a result create a learning organization that transcends the norm.

11. Respond instead of reacting – Being proactive and acting according to already established core values enables a leader to get out in front of problems while they are still manageable and before they escalate in scale.

Prior to May 6, 1954 nobody believed the record for the 4-minute mile could be broken; not only has it been broken by many athletes since then, but in the 50 years since it was broken, the time has been lowered by 17 seconds. In my first graduate level class there were teachers and administrators from various jurisdictions within Alberta, and I recall the angst and feelings of hopelessness so tangible in the room. Metaphorically, nobody in the room believed that the educational system could break though the boundaries of that 4-minute mile. A desire formed in me to explore how change is possible in the world of education: if leaders could see that this kind of change could occur once, then it would give hope for change to occur again elsewhere, and quite possibly exceed the type of learning organization that this paper describes and what I have personally experienced as an administrator. We do not have to continue to lose teachers or see principals reduced to mere managers, impotent in their ability to facilitate change; transformational change in education can be possible.

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**Appendix A**

The following items comprise the selection of "field notes" that I will be referencing throughout this paper.

501A 2008 Synthesis of EDSE 501

501B 2008 Reflections from first two days of EDSE 501

501C 2008 1$^{st}$ Artifact presented during the first class

501D 2008 School Reform: A Journey

503A 2009 Objects Study Assignment

503B 2009 Interpretive Writing Assignment

503C 2009 The Lure of The Transcendent

510A 2009 EDSE 510 Journal Review Assignment

510B 2009 EDSE 510 Week Three of Reading Response

510C 2009 1$^{st}$ Journal Response From Allan D. Lowrie

510D 2009 Who Are You?

510E 2009 EDSE 510 Journal Review

510F 2009 Writing In Professional Journals

501A 2010 Conversation Between Al Lowrie & Olenka Bilash

501B 2010 Compiled Notes for Innovative Practice in Secondary Classroom

501C 2010 Innovative Practice at Hardisty

504A 2011 Location of Inquiry

504B 2011 Collected Journal Entries

502A 2012 Meeting with the Society

502B 2012 Week of August 20-24

502C 2012 Week of August 27-Sept 1

502D 2012 Week of Sept 4-7

502E 2012 Week of Sept 10-14

502F 2012 Week of Sept 18

502G 2012 Week of Sept 26

502H 2012 Weeks of October 1-5 and 9-12

502I 2012 Getting Back to Writing (Nov 7)

502J 2012 A letter to Mr/Mrs XYZ on Starting a new Principalship

512A 2012 There and Back Again: A Principal's Story of Change

512B 2012 Final Reflections for EDSE 512

512C 2012 Reflection on John Mason

501A 2014 EDSE 501 Developing Intercultural Competencies

501B 2014 Personal Story from Pakistan