From Fission to Flourishing Leadership: Putting an End to Reacting From the Middle

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The last 3 years of being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic have caused yet unknown disruption to individuals' lives, well-being, work, and education. As the educational world recalibrates after the long run of COVID-19, schools are back in session trying to recover from what Dean and Campbell (2020) referred to as "panic-gogy," where experimentation with models and approaches in education was rife. Rapid shifts to online learning, dramatic impacts on well-being, and a state of constant change as new information and regulations were released have left staff and students alike reporting reductions in mental health, connection, and motivation (Vaillancourt et al., 2021a; Vaillancourt et al., 2021b). One cohort of administrators who were constant in managing the panic-gogy, the flux, and the varying needs of the staff and students, but who are often overlooked and under considered, are the vice-principals (VPs). This paper will discuss the establishment of the Flourishing Leadership seminar series designed explicitly for VPs and describe the active participatory nature of each session which informs the content and activities of the next.

VPs have been characterized in the academic literature as the "forgotten" and "unsung" leaders in their schools (Cohen & Schechter, 2019; Cranston et al., 2014). VPs operate from the margins in their schools often flying under everyone's radar as they work hard to earn trust and respect from their colleagues and the parent body that they serve. Their role is blurry and poorly defined, if in fact it is defined at all (Mitchell et al., 2017). Many VPs receive "clear signals that they must buy into the system, learn the rules, and emulate their administrative superiors to get ahead" (Armstrong, 2009, p. 23). This is perhaps an unattainable goal as many VPs have split roles that include classroom teaching, resource positions, and other direct student responsibilities like managing discipline. That leaves very little time for them to provide the instructional leadership, coaching, and mentoring support that their educational colleagues need and expect from them. In addition, the time VPs spend teaching in class and responding to ever-rising issues (with students, teachers, parents, and facilities) results in the administrative tasks that are a requirement of their VP position needing to be completed in the hours well after the school bell has rung. For many VPs, this leads to frustration, higher levels of anxiety, and even burnout (Celik, 2013; Hamm, 2017).

VPs have joined the ranks of formal school administration and are on the trajectory toward the principalship and district leadership positions according to researchers who have examined the position (Kwan, 2019; Marshall & Hooley, 2006). Simply, many will in fact become a school principal somewhere and they need to be prepared (Hayes & Burkett, 2021; Peters-Hawkins et al., 2017). Despite this fact, VPs are often not provided with leadership training specific to their middle leadership role or development. In most districts, VPs are included in professional development sessions with principals, yet the roles are arguably extremely different. Where the principal is the figurehead of the learning community, the VP may be assigned primarily to student discipline and general school management tasks (Brien, 2010). It is not uncommon for many VPs to work within a hierarchical structure with their principal where they do not feel like they belong, and the school is not theirs in any way (Karpinski, 2008). When faced with these

dilemmas and social realities, VPs may disconnect from the learning community and look elsewhere to contribute their leadership (Baker et al., 2018).

In acknowledgement of the value that VPs add to the leadership teams in schools and the gainful insights they can provide on the complexities, confusions, and conundrums that captivate their attentions as middle space or second chair leaders (Armstrong, 2010; Hamm et al., in press), the researchers have developed a series of seminars tailored for VPs. The aim of these seminars is to provide a platform which amplifies the voice of these important leaders and provides them with an opportunity to move from a state of fission (constant splitting of time and focus) to a state of flourishing. We will describe the establishment of the series, including data collected from the VPs about their current, post-pandemic perspectives on their roles and responsibilities, and our team strategy to engage the VPs in activities that promote sharing their lived experiences.

Purpose of the Flourishing Leadership Seminar Series

The aim of the seminar series is to help the VPs in New Brunswick examine and grow their leadership capacities to manage change, engage families and communities, shape an inclusive learning environment, promote health and well-being, manage resources, and build the capacity of their teams while always demonstrating professionalism. To counter findings in the literature that suggest VPs are not involved in such activities in their school, or only superficially, our team looked at available provincial educational documents to understand if VPs were explicitly highlighted in leadership development or school-based leadership activities. For instance, in the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) document titled: *Education Support Services Teams: School-based Team to Support Inclusion* (2013), VPs appear to be grouped with administrators in general with the statement: "Administrators, including building or district-level administrators (e.g., Superintendents, Directors, Senior Education Officers, Subject Coordinators, *School-based Administrators* [emphasis added]) contribute to the education of students in inclusive schools and classrooms, and display leadership and commitment" (p. 12). Recently, a New Brunswick Teachers' Association initiative called NB Lead (2021) described workshops designed for aspiring school leaders, learning school leaders, veteran school leaders, and lone school leaders. According to the descriptions, VPs are included in the learning school leader workshops with principals.

The project team members have each held VP roles themselves in England and Australia, New Brunswick, and Alberta respectively. Having managed the competing demands ourselves we acknowledge that the VPs are fortunate to have growth opportunities available to them, and the topics in both the EECD and NB Lead provincial documents are relevant to them and their leadership growth. However, there are challenges for these middle leaders that remain unspoken and unaddressed. In each of the existing opportunities, VPs are grouped as subordinates, which is likely to foster deference and perpetuate the lack of understanding of the unique challenges of their role. The Flourishing Leadership seminar series is geared toward VPs sharing their voice and owning their own professional learning so they can flourish in their leadership service.

Project Methodology

Guided by the invitational leadership framework which Novak (2009) described as being "built on the idea that educating in and for a democratic society ought to be based on a doing- with rather than a doing-to relationship" (p. 56), we decided to support the VPs in sharing their own experience and generating their own solutions to challenges through activity-based

collaboration. It was vital that the already overstretched VPs felt their time spent at seminars was purposeful and valuable, particularly since the seminar series was being hosted on Saturday mornings. Contact was made with senior district school leaders to seek interest in the project. As most of the senior district leaders had been VPs at some point in their own careers, empathy was high for the trials VPs face and there was excitement about the prospect of having a professional learning opportunity tailored specifically to this group. A flyer was created summarizing the opportunity and distributed through the district's listserv, inviting all 67 district VPs to the five seminars. The response was rapid with 30 VPs responding favorably to the invitation, although four of them could not attend, leaving 26 participants. Ethics approval was sought and granted to use deidentified data collected throughout the seminar series. This would allow the VPs to share their experiences openly without fear of negative consequences and ensure that their collective narratives were heard by those working in the upper management and political positions that impact their work.

Seminar Series Design

The five invitational Saturday seminars were stretched out over the course of the 2022- 2023 school year and each session was 3 hours long. There were general topics that needed to be addressed in the seminar series as it was designed in part to build leadership skills that align with the seven leadership dimensions of the *Atlantic Provinces Standards of Practice for School-based Administrators* (Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training [CAMET], 2020).

Keeping with the desire to amplify voice and build momentum towards solutions identified by the VPs, the team only provided a loose structure for the series. This would allow for the freedom to construct activities that will be meaningful and target the needs of the participants as they arise.

The seminar topics outlined were as follows:

1. Avoiding harmful leadership styles and actions and demonstrating professionalism
2. Shaping an inclusive, positive, and healthy teaching and learning culture
3. Engaging your community and building the leadership potential of colleagues and students
4. Confronting and understanding rapid change while leading school operations
5. Supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples

Seminars 1 to 4 address the seven CAMET (2020) leadership dimensions. Seminar 5 was

considered an essential dimension of professional learning by our team despite it not being addressed in the CAMET dimensions. We noted that the provincial education leadership standard documents we found for Alberta (Alberta Education, 2020) and British Columbia (British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals Association, 2019) explicitly addressed professional learning that supported leadership development related to the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. Further, the British Columbia document was explicitly designed for principals and vice-principals.

Delivery and Results of Seminar 1

Under the theme *avoiding harmful leadership styles and actions and demonstrating professionalism,* the first seminar started with some familiarity activities to establish a sense of safety and trust amongst participants, most of whom did not know each other. Following these activities, information around the limited research about the VP experience, qualities of leaders, and toxic leadership was shared.

Group culture-building activities through story-telling information sharing continued throughout the morning session. Then in the second segment, we conducted a World Café activity (World Café Community Foundation, 2015). This activity is a round-robin way of collaboratively sharing lived experiences and documenting thoughts and feelings related to specific questions that ensures all participants can share their experiences, reflect with new collaborators, and make collective discoveries. Two questions were posed:

1. What are the challenges that VPs are confronting in 2022 in their schools and communities?
2. What are the strategies you are using to address the challenges and complexities?

Four emergent themes were identified through the analysis of the World Café data: (a) the lack of agency in setting priorities, including personal and organizational priorities; (b) the absence of time and preparedness for immediate and long-term situations and events that occur within the parameters of their role(s); (c) being in a constant state of organizational flux and blurriness; and (d) the absence of necessary information sharing to provide clarity to effectively fulfill the role(s). The first seminar concluded with the understanding that their unique and now shared experiences were the first step towards allyship in the changes crucial to being able to succeed in their varied leadership roles.

From the themes, the team created summary statements to provide to the VPs and noted a general air of disempowerment across the statements recorded by the participants. Many of the responses alluded to, or boldly stated, that there wasn't enough time, there wasn't enough information, there wasn't enough support, there wasn't enough clarity, there wasn't enough communication, and there wasn't enough of "them" to do the job they wanted to do or to act on the things they considered priorities. The collaborative participatory design of the seminars meant that the team could use this information to construct Seminar 2 to reflect back the findings of Seminar 1 and seek clarity, but also to shape the content to support considered and productive action.

Design of Seminar 2

The theme for Seminar 2 held one month later was listed as *Shaping an inclusive, positive, and healthy teaching and learning culture.* This seminar began with activities to reconnect with each other and then provide an opportunity for reflection and feedback around the summary statements from Seminar 1.

The VPs agreed with the statements and added that the variance amongst their roles in terms of time allocated to administration, teaching, resource, and other activities impacted how they interpreted the statements, but each VP could see their narrative reflected in the statements. Another note from the activity was that relationships were not identified explicitly in the themes, but each statement directly impacted relationships. This was particularly important as the VPs generally wanted to prioritize relationships, support, and collaboration but felt they "could not get to it."

The content of this seminar was around building culture by understanding self- determination and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The group engaged in a series of activities to explore their "Why?" What was their driver for being a VP, how did they go about executing that, and what types of things did they do to relay their purpose? VPs identified their values and explored the dissonance between their values and the existence they described in Seminar 1. To bring their relational priorities into their leadership of the school community, the VPs were then invited to set goals using a scaffold that would help them take the first measurable action towards aligning their way of working with their desired outcome. Discussion of what motivates each of their team members and mentoring relationships followed these activities and were related to the concept of building inclusive, positive, and safe school cultures.

Next Steps

The third, fourth and fifth seminars will be designed and delivered in the same collaboratively constructed way. The team will use the data collected from each seminar to determine the necessary content and activities tailored to the needs of the group while still addressing the original CAMET themes. The intention is to continue to provide a platform for constructive generation of solutions to the challenges VPs face, build leadership capacity and skills through the experience of engaging in the activities and through the reflection of findings, and create a community of positive allyship. Having identified the complexities within and across the VP role, we are now moving towards some leadership practices that will support a healthy and positive work culture and allow the VPs to proactively plan, actively respond, and prioritize, rather than exist in a state of reactivity that cannot be sustained alongside wellness.

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