Running Head: LEADERSHIP THAT AFFECTS TEACHER ENGAGEMENT

What Leadership Behaviors Foster Teacher Engagement?

University of Portland

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**Chapter One: Introduction**

**Introduction**

Improving student engagement and achievement is a focus in schools and classrooms across the country. Effective school leaders are also beginning to realize the importance of creating a school environment that engages teachers. When leaders have highly engaged teachers, many aspects of their schools will benefit (Shuck & Herd, 2012). Leaders have numerous roles in the school and often do not have the opportunity to step back and find out how their actions affect the engagement of staff. How can school administration affect teacher engagement and create a school environment that is engaging for staff?

Corporate businesses put much effort into determining how to create and maintain employee engagement in order to be successful and remain competitive. Corporate culture is viewed to have a large impact on the commitment and engagement of employees. Richard Bartrem, Vice-President of Communications and Community Relations for WestJet presented on the importance of actively creating a culture that fosters employee engagement (Ivey Business School, 2014). Bartrem claims that, “If you are not planning for what the culture is going to be like in your organization, you’ve missed a very big chunk of the employee experience that will actually drive a better company.” In writing for Forbes magazine, Sylvia Vorhauser-Smith goes on to add that employees engaged in their work are “likely to be motivated, to remain committed to their employer and to stay focused on achieving business goals and driving the organization’s future.” (2013). Developing an engaged workforce seems to be viewed as a key component to success and growth for certain companies.

School leaders have also recognized the importance of creating a school environment that engages teachers. Many leadership articles focus on implementing strategies that engage and motivate staff to make a difference in the classroom (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Leadership style can have direct impact on the teacher engagement and thereby student engagement and achievement (Bird, Wang, Watson & Murray, 2009). This study will focus on identifying leadership strategies that are effective in creating a working environment that engages teachers in their role.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to assess leadership strategies that are effective in creating environments that are conducive to improving/sustaining teacher engagement. Informal conversations, observations and interviews were also used to gather feedback during the year to discover which leadership practices had the strongest effect on creating or maintaining a work environment that fosters teacher engagement. This study will take a look at the teacher engagement data collected before and after the implementation of selected leadership strategies and which strategies were most effective in fostering that engagement.

Leadership behavior has been shown to have a strong influence on employee engagement. There is not as much research that indicates which leadership behaviours are most instrumental in improving culture and increasing teacher engagement (Shuck & Herd, 2012). The goal of this study is to begin to identify those behaviours that are most effective in engaging staff.

**Significance**

The engagement of students and teachers has become a focus of many school districts in Alberta. As such, our central Alberta school district administers annual surveys to our students and teachers based on Gallup’s 12 indicators of engagement. While a few selected areas of this survey will be used as a basis for this research, my focus is on the particular strategies or actions taken by administration that affect these scores. As part of an exit interview upon leaving my previous school, I surveyed that staff about their perceptions of teacher engagement and the actions of administration that either supported or posed obstacles against it. Themes that emerged from those discussions formed the basis of my observations and conversations in this study.

The participants in this study were teachers at Ecole Father Jan Elementary School in St. Albert, Alberta. There is a wide variance in experience, education, and age in the staff at this school, with some teachers having spent their entire careers in the school, to some brand new teachers this year. Ecole Father Jan is a French Immersion Elementary School located in a middle-upper class area of central area of St. Albert, Alberta. It has a student body population of about 300 students in kindergarten through grade 6. There is also a Sports Academy component that is available to students in grades 4-6 and recently a French Immersion preschool is also housed in our building.

As part of a new administration team at Ecole Father Jan, my goal was to gauge if the strategies that were implemented at my previous school were equally effective in engaging teachers in a different school environment. I was also interested in taking a look at the literature to pinpoint areas of focus to use for strategies.

**Summary**

Leaders have a significant impact on teacher engagement, which, in turn, can affect student engagement and achievement. The role of an administrator is vast and includes a wide variety of tasks. If teacher engagement is a key component for school improvement and success, what are the key behaviours (non-negotiables) that should be the focus for school leaders? The purpose of this study was to assess leadership strategies that are effective in creating environments that are conducive to improving/sustaining teacher engagement.

**Chapter II: Review of the Literature**

**Introduction**

The following literature review was conducted to explore prior research on teacher engagement and leadership. The review begins with a look at the definitions and effects of teacher engagement and moves into a review of leadership behaviours that have been shown to be effective in fostering teacher trust and development as they relate to engagement. The literature review concludes with an exploration of research on the link between leadership and teacher engagement.

**Teacher Engagement**

***Definition***

Much has been written about teacher engagement and how it can be defined in a school.

Positive learning environments, school culture and school climate are often terms that are used alongside the term “engagement,” as many factors have an impact on the school as a community and the commitment level of the teachers.

Engagement signifies commitment and ownership. It implies that there is an intrinsic involvement by the teacher to persist and persevere in order to accomplish the tasks at hand (Rossmiller, 1988). Bird et al. (2009) define engagement as a reflection of the connectedness that teachers feel towards their work and how passionate they are about what they do. According to Gallup, teacher engagement can be defined as the “employee’s level of involvement with, enthusiasm for, and commitment to their work and the organization’s outcomes. Engaged employees are emotionally committed to their work and intrinsically motivated to achieve excellence.” (Gordon, 2013, p.7)

The definition of teacher engagement has also been expanded to include various levels of engagement, subdividing into cognitive, emotional, and behavioural levels of engagement. Cognitive refers to a belief by teachers that their work is safe and meaningful. Emotional engagement outlines a sense of belonging and willingness to involve personal resources. Behavioural engagement refers to the reaction to positive appraisal which encourages them involve personal resources (Shuck &Herd, 2012). In the same way, Baughman, as quoted by Penfold (2011) acknowledges the importance of trust, support, commitment and relationships as contributors to teacher engagement. Teacher collaboration and interaction empower teachers to work collectively and can build teacher engagement (MacTavish & Kolb, 2006). Engagement appears to go far deeper than simply job satisfaction and salary; research has certainly indicated that there is an emotional component that inspires people to go “above and beyond” their job expectations.

Gallup also subdivides its Q12 survey into a hierarchy that includes four main areas of focus that reflect different areas of engagement. The “What do I give?” level focuses on developing a sense of teamwork and trust, as well as fostering collaboration among teachers and stimulating thinking and reflection (Gordon, 2013). For the purposes of this study, teacher engagement was defined as the attachment of teachers to their job and their involvement and enthusiasm for the job they do everyday as reflected by questions three to six on the Gallup Q12 Survey.

***Importance***

As mentioned earlier, several studies have shown a direct correlation between teacher engagement, student engagement, and of course, student achievement (Cardwell, 2011). Even from a student’s perspective, high levels of teacher engagement have attributed to high levels of student engagement. Teachers who are engaged can be motivated to become leaders in their own schools and become instrumental in improving school performance (MacTavish & Kolb, 2006). At a time when we see so many young teachers leaving the profession prematurely (Tye & O’Brien, 2002), and when administration is emerging as a crucial factor in teacher attrition (Boyd et al., 2011), the importance of engaging our teachers becomes paramount.

Developing a high level of engaged employees makes a measurable difference in the workplace (Shuck &Herd, 2012). It has become a crucial focus for school leaders to maintain and improve their schools for both students and staff. Leaders must move their staff from “ a nice place to work” to sense of attachment and commitment to make a difference. Job satisfaction and engagement are strong building blocks for effective, high-achieving schools.

***Characteristics/Evidence***

Evidence of engagement should be reflected in teacher attitudes towards the workplace and a motivation to go beyond basic expectations. Teachers who are engaged reflect a deep commitment to school success, as well as a sense of optimism and positivity (Bird et al., 2009). There is an increased sense of pride and work ethic for teachers that feel a connection and attachment to their school. They view their work as being significant and devote energy, time and effort to their role (Klassen et al., 2012). With an ever-changing list of responsibilities and situations in the classroom, engaged teachers are “motivated, display energy and effectiveness in completing tasks, and are able to deal with the complex demands that arise within the course of their workdays.”(p. 319) This sense of efficacy can develop self-esteem and a clearer identity in engaged teachers (Basikin, 2007).

**Leadership**

School principals have several roles in managing a school. Some roles are involved with students, parents and staff members, often referred to as “instructional leadership” while others are “behind the scenes” roles like budgets, reports and district paperwork that refer more to the operational management of the school (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012). In juggling these roles, the lines become blurred and it becomes difficult to give enough time and attention to any one area. Much research has been done on the influence of leadership on school culture and teacher engagement. Protheroe (2006) refers to the leaders as being “ at the heart of working conditions” and found that support and recognition were integral components to keeping teachers in the profession. In their research of leadership in five effective elementary schools, Parsons and Beauchamp (2012) found that the leader was often the catalyst for success in the school through his or her actions within the school with the staff and students. Leaders are viewed as providing direction and exercising influence, while establishing conditions that enable others to be effective (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003). Orr and Orphanos (2007) also discuss the importance of school leadership on quality of instruction and teachers’ perceptions of their effectiveness with students. In their work with the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, they found that goal setting, encouragement, and coaching had direct positive influence on teacher engagement and satisfaction. Other organizational strategies, such as allocated collaboration time and support, also contributed to engagement. Leithwood and Reihl (2003) identify three key areas for leadership success as being, “ setting directions, developing people and developing the organization” (p. 3). Bird et al. (2012) have also done considerable research on styles of leadership that may be conducive to teacher effectiveness and engagement. They use the term “authentic leadership” to refer leadership that includes an ethical/moral view coupled with transparent communication and a sense of self-awareness as being effective in building trust and engagement with teachers.

There is also a shift from the linear, logical perception of leadership to suggesting that the outlook and enthusiasm of the leader can have an effect on those around them, drawing them in and engaging them in a common goal or mission (Russell, 2008). She goes on to state, “ Leaders who do feel enthusiastic and engaged with work are more likely to inspire those around them to be engaged and inspired also.” (p. 2) Simply by being a supportive, visible presence for their staff, leaders can build a relationship of mutual respect and trust, which can motivate teachers and affect engagement (MacTavish & Kolb, 2006).

The goal of this paper is to determine where principals can get the “biggest bang for their buck” in creating an environment that is conducive to teacher engagement. The main focus will be on areas that relate to fostering teacher development and developing teamwork and trust.

***Teacher Development***

The role of the administrator is becoming far more complex and is focused much more on becoming an instructional leader as opposed to a manager. Successful schools often have some form of shared leadership that is fostered and developed by the administration (Parsons &Beauchamp, 2012). MacTavish and Kolb (2006) also agree that empowering teacher leaders and creating a collaborative culture have shown to be effective in enhancing teacher engagement. Strategies for fostering teacher leaders include providing teachers with autonomy in their own classrooms, soliciting teacher participation in school decisions, and encouraging innovative pedagogy in the classroom. Blasé and Blasé (2001) also discuss the importance of promoting professional growth for teachers through professional development opportunities, collaboration and staff involvement in instructional decision-making. Penfold (2011) goes even further in suggesting that leaders that involve themselves in professional development alongside their teachers are instrumental in increasing staff morale and engagement.

Teacher development can include both collaboration and professional development that is designed to help improve instruction. In a study on teacher perspectives of leadership, Blasé and Blasé (1999) found that “promoting a teacher’s professional development was the most influential instructional leadership behavior…which accounted for most of the influence on a teacher’s commitment, involvement and innovativeness in the classroom” (p. 353). Leithwood and Reihl (2003) refer to the promotion of cooperation and working together toward common goals within teams or professional learning communities, which reflects the importance of teacher collaboration and providing opportunities for participation in decision-making. Teacher leadership is also an area that fosters growth and development within teaching staff. Beauchamp and Parsons (2012) found that principals play a crucial role in developing a clear focus that supports professional development and collaboration while also inviting teachers to take part in school leadership.

Fostering teacher development through collaboration, professional development and teacher leadership seem to be effective strategies in engaging teachers to improving their practice and become involved in their schools.

***Teamwork and Trust***

Employee engagement develops out of the relationships that are formed between leaders and workers (Bird et al., 2012). Teachers develop a sense of well-being and accomplishment when they know what is expected of them and they feel recognized for their accomplishments. Research conducted by Ostrem and Wheeler, as cited by Bird et al. (2009) has found a “significant predictive relationship between leadership behavior and engagement, trust in the organization and trust in the immediate supervisor.” (p. 156) Blasé and Blasé (2001) also refer to the positive impact of feedback, suggestions, inquiry and praise that encourage teachers to reflect on their own practice. It would seem to follow, then, that positive feedback can have a significant impact on teacher engagement.

Just as teachers are directed to praise the accomplishments of their students, research has found that praise and recognition also have a profound effect on teacher engagement (Blasé & Kirby, 1992). In their research study of over 800 teachers, praise was viewed as a positive and influential strategy. The teachers were quick to point out that this referred to formal or informal positive feedback to individuals about their professional performance, not personal compliments. These acknowledgements, verbal or nonverbal were found to be motivating to the teachers. Bird et al. (2012) also referred to the importance of school leaders in creating a sense of belonging and using recognition and praise to foster growth in their teachers. Penfold (2011) found that constructive feedback, public recognition and peer recognition were factors that affected a teacher’s sense of belonging in their school. He also mentions the use of humour as a means to open communication lines with staff, impacting staff satisfaction and morale.

Leadership that is positive, offers feedback and uses praise and recognition to acknowledge the accomplishments of staff appears to play a large role in developing a sense of trust and teamwork in teachers. This perception by teachers seems to foster a sense of engagement and commitment to their school and role.

***Influence***

Much research has been done in the area of leadership and how it is instrumental in influencing the trust and engagement of teachers. Providing opportunities for teachers to learn and grow within the school community as well as offering positive feedback along with praise and recognition, have been documented as being effective in creating a sense of belonging and commitment to the workplace. Leaders seem to play a pivotal role in fostering the engagement of their teachers. What do teachers view as being vital to their sense of satisfaction and engagement in their positions?

**Chapter III: Methodology**

The following section discusses the methodology used to conduct the study, which investigated leadership behaviors that affected teacher engagement. This section provides details about the research questions and hypothesis, the role of the researcher, the participants and the setting, rationale, limitations and delimitations, materials, design and procedure, and the instruments used.

**Research Question and Hypothesis Statement**

Several authors have indicated that leadership behaviours are found to have a direct influence on teacher engagement, from encouraging staff development to offering recognition and praise. Specifically, research suggests that principals play a critical role in framing both school climate and affecting the engagement of teachers (Gordon, 2013). Teachers who are engaged have a commitment to their workplace and go “above and beyond” their basic job description to improve both themselves and student results in their school. Thus, creating an environment that engages teachers should be a priority of the leaders in the school. The purpose of this study was to determine which leadership behaviours are most effective in fostering teacher engagement, specifically in the areas of teamwork and trust, as well as teacher development.

This was a qualitative study that aimed to identify leadership behaviours that affect engagement. Gallup’s Q12 survey is administered within our school district each year and a few of these questions were used as a basis for the implementation of certain leadership behaviours as well as to guide the interview questions. Informal conversations, observations and individual interviews with staff members were used to gather feedback from teachers themselves on what leadership behaviours are most effective in fostering engagement.

I was serving as a new administrator at the school involved in this study. To gather my information, I held staff conversations about engagement during faculty meetings and used informal observations and discussions with staff, as well as interviews with individual teachers to gather further data during the year to discover which leadership practices had the strongest effect on creating or maintaining a work environment that fosters teacher engagement. All of these activities are common practices utilized by administrators to gauge the “pulse” of how things are going for the teachers in their schools.

Given that research has shown a strong link between leadership behaviours and teacher engagement, what are the key behaviours (non-negotiables) that should be the focus for school leaders?

**Role of the Researcher**

I graduated from the University of Alberta in June 1990, receiving a Bachelor of Education with a minor in Special Education. In addition to my studies, I was a member of the Special Education Council, as well as serving on the University of Alberta’s Students’ Union as a representative from the Faculty of Education. During this time, I also attended the Université of Laval in Quebec, taking two French Immersion courses. After I graduated, I began teaching at an elementary school in St. Albert, Alberta, teaching grade four as well as French as a Second Language. I moved to Calgary and taught at a rural elementary/middle school, incorporating my love of music into a program for students. Upon returning to Edmonton, I taught Junior High students FSL, Science and Drama. From there I began to teach music back in St. Albert for about 15 years at a variety of elementary schools. Working in the music department puts one in contact with all of the students and teachers in the school and it was then that I was encouraged to explore working in administration. I was an assistant principal for three years in the same school I had been previously teaching music. It was at this school that our administration team worked to create collaborative teams, developed a school leadership team and fostered some great work in the area of writing and inquiry-based learning. In June 2013, I enrolled in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at the University of Portland. I expect to graduate in May 2015.

Effective August of 2014, I was transferred to Ecole Father Jan; a French Immersion Elementary in St. Albert. I was serving this new school community in the role of Assistant

Principal and Learning Support Facilitator. Being new to this school and the staff, I hoped to implement some of the leadership strategies that I had in place at my previous school and find out if they were truly effective in engaging teachers, even those that are new to my leadership. I also hoped to realize the potential effect that leaders have in engaging teachers, as well as pinpoint a few leadership behaviours that are effective in developing a sense of teamwork and trust as well as fostering collaboration and development among a new staff.

**Participants and Context**

The participants in this study were seventeen teachers at Ecole Father Jan Elementary School in St. Albert, Alberta. There is a wide variety of experience and interests within the staff. Certain staff members have been there for many years, while there are some new teachers that have joined in the last year or two. The staff was predominantly female, with two newer male teachers at the upper elementary level. Ecole Father Jan had a population of about 300 students in kindergarten to grade six. Certain students in grades four to six were also part of a district-wide Sports Academy program. The school also housed a privately run preschool and before/after school care.

Effective August 2014, there were two new administrators (myself being one), two new secretaries and a new school counselor joining this school community. In light of all of the changes happening at this school, it was the hope that this focus on teacher engagement would help make some of these transitions smoother for the staff as a whole. This study was also designed to provide our administrative team with some great feedback and guidance in fostering teacher engagement in this changing environment.

**Rationale**

As a leader, I am always searching for the best and most effective ways to engage my staff. I find that if the staff feels engaged and empowered, they are more motivated to try new strategies in the classroom and, hopefully, affect student learning. From past experience, collaboration with other teachers was a key component to help teachers gain confidence and begin to take a collective approach to educating students. Being relatively new to the administration world, I would often find that there were so many roles to play, and that sometimes the focus was not always on what would be the best for the teachers and students in the school setting. I also had the privilege (or curse) of being a leader in the same school in which I was teaching. I found that my teaching background in that school very often grounded me in knowing what teachers needed, what would be frustrating and what might be the best approach to motivate them. I was interested in discovering which leadership behaviours, if any, made the biggest difference in engaging those teachers and can be transferred to a whole new staff.

Teacher engagement is the key component to moving school initiatives forward and creating positive change for both students and staff. As a leader, I wanted to know how to “get the biggest bang for my buck” in leading others. I wanted to focus on things that work and use my time wisely in my leadership role. What leadership behaviours have the biggest impact on teacher engagement?

**Limitations**

* This was my first year at this school.
* The sample size was limited to 17 teachers in the same school.
* This was not a random sample.
* There were so many changes taking place at this school during this year, it may be difficult to determine if leadership is the primary influence on any changes that occurred.

**Delimitations**

* This study was only focusing on leadership behaviors that promote teacher engagement, not other aspects of school culture and climate.
* External factors were not accounted for.

**Materials**

* Gallup Q12 Survey
* Interview Questions
* Consent Form
* Observation and Discussion field notes
* Recordings and transcribed information from individual interviews with staff members

**Design and Procedure**

This study incorporated qualitative data collected from observations and interviews with the staff in the school setting. These discussions provided some insight into the level of teacher engagement before and after implementation of the leadership strategies. Specifically, I was focusing on four of the items on the Gallup Q12 survey that focus on the individual contribution level of “What do I give?” They were as follows:

Q03: At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday

Q04: In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.

Q05: My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.

Q06: There is someone at work who encourages my development. (Gallup, p.6)

As a new administrative team, we implemented a few strategies that focused on the areas of engagement reflected by these questions. I designed a short, open-ended set of interview questions designed to gather feedback and gain insight on the implemented leadership practices or shed light on other leadership behaviours that are engaging to the staff. I interviewed individual staff members about their own perceptions and experiences of leadership behaviours, and the effect they had on creating or maintaining a work environment that affected their engagement in their role. These interviews took place within the school setting in a location that was comfortable for the teacher- classrooms, little work spaces, or meeting areas, but not in the front office of the school. As an administrator, I wanted to gather honest feedback and not have my position or their perception of the interview location to affect their responses. These semi-structured interviews took place with nine teachers in January and February 2015 and all responders willingly signed consent forms prior to being interviewed. This was a sample of convenience and the teachers that were interviewed represented our school population with varying years of teaching experience, grade level expertise and extra-curricular involvement levels in the school. All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes.

Based on this feedback, responses were analyzed for common trends that indicate “best practices” of leadership to engage teachers. A constant comparative method, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), was used to identify and code common themes. These common themes were identified and sorted by color on index cards into three main categories that reflected teacher engagement. The three main areas that emerged from the feedback revolved around **Teacher Development** and **Trust and Teamwork**, with a third theme that emerged that will be referred to as **Leadership Authenticity**. This feedback provided the qualitative data necessary to gauge both the effectiveness of implemented leadership practices as well as offer insight into other leadership behaviours that impact teacher engagement. These results indicated areas of improvement and helped to shed light on specific leadership behaviours or actions that affected engagement in our school.

**Institutional Review Board**

The University of Portland’s Institutional Review Board has approved this study. As an exit interview from my previous school, I asked teachers for any feedback they could offer about effective leadership practices that fostered an environment that was conducive to creating or maintaining teacher engagement. Based on this feedback, I wanted to explore the transferability of leadership practices and the effectiveness of certain behaviors on staff at another school. All information collected in this study was confidential and written consent was obtained from all teachers involved in the interview process at Ecole Father Jan.

**Instruments**

* Interview questions used with staff members.
* Observations/Discussion Field notes

**Summary**

Through the data collected from observations and individual teacher interviews, this study measured the effect of certain leadership behaviours on teacher engagement. Feedback was gathered from staff to determine leadership behaviours that were most effective in fostering an environment to create/maintain teacher engagement. Throughout the study, I continued to gather feedback to inform best practices for leaders in affecting the engagement of staff and potentially of students.

**Chapter IV: Results**

**Introduction**

As new administrators at Ecole Father Jan, my administrative partner and I implemented a few leadership strategies at the beginning of the school year to create an environment that fostered teacher engagement. These ideas were based on practices that were utilized in our previous experiences at other schools and deemed to be instrumental in helping us get to know this new staff and to bring our staff together.

As the focus of this study was on two areas: Teacher Development (Questions 3 and 6) and Teamwork and Trust (Questions 4 and 5), the following leadership strategies were implemented at the school.

In the area of **Teacher Development**, the Q12 questions relating to this topic were:

Q03 – AT work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best everyday.

Q06 – There is someone at work who encourages my development.

As mentioned earlier by Blasé and Blasé (2001), it is important for leaders to support collaboration as they, “model teamwork, provide time for collaborative work, and advocate sharing and peer observation” (p. 23). We, as an administrative team, implemented two strategies designed to engage teachers in the area of collaboration and development.

1) We provided opportunities for teachers to collaborate within their grade level and division for one hour each month. At this time, we would take the students to an assembly to promote school-wide positive behavior expectations.

2) Through annual Professional Growth Plan discussions, we made a conscious effort to promote professional development that aligned to our school goals. We talked often about our school goal and encouraged our teachers to take risks and try new strategies to improve learning.

In the area of **Teamwork and Trust**, we focused on the following two questions:

Q04 – In the last seven days, I have received recognition and praise for doing good work.

Q05- My supervisor, or someone at my work, seems to care about me as a person.

Recognition is viewed as a key component of talented leaders as Gordon (2013) mentions that an effective leader, “Celebrates success, encourages teachers to celebrate, and believes that recognizing success improves performance and the school”(p. 5). As an administrative team, we implemented the following practices:

1. Creating a “Week at a Glance” overview for our staff and incorporating some “bouquets” for staff based on contributions in our school that went above and beyond the regular assignments for that week.
2. We made a conscious effort to visit each teacher once every week either before/after school or during breaks to simply check in and connect with them.

These practices were implemented at the beginning of the school year and I began to interview staff members in January 2015, after we had been in the school for a few months and teachers had some time to become comfortable with our administrative team.

All interviews were conducted one-on-one and were semi-structured in order to allow the respondents to focus on their current reality, yet bring all of their prior experiences to the questions as well. I interviewed three teachers with 20-30 years of experience, two teachers that are in their first or second year of teaching, and four teachers with about 10-15 years of experience, 2 of them teaching at Division One (gr 1-3) and two teaching at Division 2 (gr 4-6). After the first few interviews, themes began to emerge that reflected the impact of some of our implemented strategies as well as other factors that staff members felt contributed to their engagement levels.

After speaking to several staff members, main themes seemed to come from the interview responses, some referencing current leadership practices, and others from a more general perspective on what motivates them to come to work each day. Many of the comments in the interviews reflected back on strategies that we had implemented, however the impact of these strategies was far more encompassing than first anticipated. While engagement was certainly affected by our leadership practices, it seemed that the initial engagement in that area may have extended to other areas of their teaching practice and engagement. In the area of Teacher Development, the themes of **Collaboration, Setting Common Goals and Teacher Input** emerged. When discussing leadership practices that build Trust and Teamwork, **Building Relationships, Offering Recognition** and utilizing the **Strengths** of teachers were viewed as invaluable strategies to build teacher engagement. A third area that emerged through the interviews was **Leadership Authenticity** and was referred to by all respondents, regardless of their experience, subject specialization or background.

*Teacher Development*

When asked about their engagement levels in the area of Teacher Development, seven of the nine teachers interviewed referred back to the collaboration time that was implemented this school year. Many teachers loved the opportunity to have time set aside to work as a team with their colleagues. “You take the kids for an hour and you let us be a team….and it’s engagement because everyone is together and we are working as a team; we are not in our own little world.”

The teamwork aspect of the collaboration time also came out in teachers feeling supported in learning new things. A couple of teachers referred to the power of learning from colleagues who teach in grades above and below their own to guide their own teaching. “ Our collab is amazing; I really like to talk to above and below us.” In learning from others, another comment was, “You give us collab time to work together. Two or three brains are better than one. It helps bridge the gap between levels.” One newer teacher commented on the change in her confidence level since the collaboration sessions had started. “ Last year, I was terrified to try anything…but I just feel so much more assured that if I try something new and I mess it up, it’s going to be okay this year,” as she was referring to the support she felt from collaborating with other teachers.

In addition to working together with their colleagues, teachers found another key component to effective teacher development and collaboration was the focus on a common goal. As one teacher mentioned, “ It makes us feel that your vision of how you want things to go; we are part of it. You are wanting to get to the same goal we are. We are in it together. Like there’s no ‘I’ in team.” Another commented, “ We’re all on the same page, we’re all working towards a common goal and…I’m just thrilled with how things are going.” One teacher also viewed admin as the “link” between people that “closes the gaps between staff. “ She feels that administration is an instrumental part of bringing people together as they can “really open up the communication lines between staff or create a distance.” This common vision seemed to guide other professional development opportunities and engage certain teachers in exploring other workshops or sessions. Teachers referred to feeling supported when they wanted to explore PD for themselves as, “ You give us opportunities,” and felt engaged, as leadership was, “ really motivating us to be the best that we can be.” It would appear that having a common vision, giving time for teachers to work together and supporting them in their own professional development engaged them in their work as professionals.

In discussing collaboration, several respondents also referred to the importance of having a voice and knowing that their input was valued. One teacher felt that when leaders take time to ask for input, it is motivating for teachers in the classroom, claiming, “ Our opinions are always valued, they are always taken into consideration.” Another teacher felt that, “ It’s being heard or just being valued as people, that is going to affect how we teach kids.” It was also important to know that input was accepted and welcomed, as one teacher cautioned, “ When you feel that you’re heard and that it’s okay to voice your opinion about something…you don’t have to be afraid that ‘if I open my mouth, what are they going to think?’” Knowing that ideas are valued and will be considered makes a big difference as one sixth grade teacher commented, “there’s a difference between administrators saying ‘What do you think?’ and then just ripping up the paper because, you know, they had to ask, and giving people the opportunity for real, effective input. Like what we think really does matter – that just empowers us, right?” When teachers feel that their opinions are valuable to the team, it appears to validate their contributions and engage them in pursuing professional development and collaboration.

*Teamwork and Trust – Recognition and Relationships*

Themes of recognition and feeling valued seemed to be interwoven in every interview. While several respondents did refer back to the implemented strategies in this area, there were many other examples and comments that viewed building relationships and recognition as a key area in the engagement of teachers. When asked about advice to give to new administrators, one beginning teacher commented, “ take the time to get to know your staff; it will be worth its weight in gold later on when you can figure out what makes that person tick or what makes them excited or their strengths.” Another seasoned teacher viewed building relationships as the stepping stone to fostering engagement in the school as she mentioned, “ Relationships are the huge one. You can engage people. You can get the quiet ones onboard and sometimes you wouldn’t notice their ideas until they get engaged.” Building real connections with people and taking the time to get to know them as a person seem to be crucial to creating an engaging environment.

Throughout the interview process, I did ask what specific actions helped to build the engagement in the area of trust and teamwork. It was here that two teachers referred back the “Week at a Glance” overview and the “staff bouquets” that acknowledge the contributions of staff. On teacher stated, “ I think that everybody likes to be recognized and celebrated for who they are…the little bulletin for the week when you recognize people, that is good.” Another teacher commented on how it felt for things to be noticed each week, claiming,

I really like, instead of waiting until the staff meeting to hear the bouquets – I know it must be a lot of work, I like how you mention all the different people and ‘Good job for doing this and good job for doing that.’ Because all of a sudden, you get lost and you feel, ‘Did they actually notice that?’….It’s kinda nice, a little pat on the back and…it’s ok, it kind of validates things and motivates you to keep going.

A teacher who had been teaching for over 25 years also referred to recognition as being “just the small things” that make a difference. It is the validation that comes with the recognition that encourages teachers to stay engaged in their roles. “I care for you and I have your back because I know you are doing a good job or your best,” is the message that little surprises, little notes, positive comments or praise sent to her. Another teacher mentioned, “ I feel engaged because I feel that I’m valued for what I’m doing.” This came from not only from being recognized or praised, but also from the feeling that admin was aware of what was happening in her classroom.

In addition to formal feedback and recognition, three teachers spoke about using their own strengths to improve their own practice and the practice of others. One teacher with 30 years of experience stressed the importance of being respected and acknowledged as individuals that are bringing their own strengths and skill sets to the table. Good administrators “ seem to see the best in us, regardless of what is. It makes it fun and I feel very supported.” Another echoed that sentiment, citing good leadership as, “accepting differences amongst the team and putting them together and making them work. “ It was pointed out by one respondent that sometimes teachers have a hard time showing their true abilities and seem to stifle or hide them in the school setting. Engaging administrators bring that out and see the strengths in everyone. “ We teach to our strengths and that transfers to the children and I look for the strengths in them.” Her advice to administrators was, “ Instead of looking at the little things we are NOT doing, look at the good things we ARE doing.” Acknowledging the differences and recognizing the strengths of teachers seems to validate their contributions and engage them in their work.

Relationships seem to be the cornerstone of creating a feeling of trust and teamwork. Leaders who get to know their staff, offer recognition to teachers, and recognize the strengths of each member of the team seem to engage their teachers. It would appear that teachers feel much more of a connection to their roles and their school if they feel like a valuable member of the team. Based on these interviews, the sense of empowerment and validation that comes from building strong, relationships and offering input and recognition, motivates and engages teachers.

*Leadership Authenticity*

While this theme doesn’t tie directly into the two areas of focus, it was mentioned as being key to effective leadership by every single teacher involved in the interview process. Beginning teachers, as well as those with experience, all referred to effective leaders as being genuine, authentic, involved or real. Leaders who are engaged themselves, are thought to be very motivating and engaging to teachers. As one teacher put it, “ We will follow what you do. So if you guys want to go in 200%, so are we.” A beginning teacher felt encouraged when leaders were involved at the ground level because, “ you just want to bring more to the table because they are.” In sharing advice with new administrators, one teacher suggested that they should be, “supporting (teachers) with their decisions and believing the same kind of goals.” The idea of staying involved with the staff and not living in the front office, came out as one teacher stated, “I think that when an administrator’s door is closed to often, that just sends a message to me that, ‘This is me in my world, and that is you in your world.’ That is not the way I work.” Several teachers mentioned the power that comes when admin is involved with the staff and working with them to achieve goals. “Be a team player. Don’t be up there delegating – you do this and you do this. You are actually part of the team. You are actually involved.”

In addition to being involved, teachers were also motivated by leaders who were “real” and understood the reality of the classroom. As a first year teacher stated, “ Be authentic, because it’s apparent when you’re not,” as he was describing the insecurities that can come when teachers are left guessing where they stand. A well-established teacher echoed those sentiments in encouraging administrators to, “Be real. You need to talk the talk and walk it. Don’t just talk it.” She went on to explain how leaders should do this, “Be involved. Be with the kids. Be part of the staff. Know the kids’ names. Just be real.” She also felt that sincerity behind certain actions and statements was crucial; not just doing things “because it’s your job.” The idea of being open and honest also came out as another teacher described authenticity as, “ not pretending, that, you know, I’m going to say that they’re doing a good job, but behind closed doors saying, ‘We’ve got to do something with her!’” Teachers are engaged when they feel supported and know they are not just being paid lip service to do their jobs. Leadership who gets involved engaged themselves at the grassroots level was motivating to several teachers.

A positive, enthusiastic attitude was often mentioned along with the authentic comments, inspiring teachers to be engaged. This comment seemed to tie things together, claiming that strong administration is the foundation of a strong school and that leaders “have to be fully onboard and they have to be engaged; it makes the rest of us do the same. When they are positive, when they are onboard and they are engaged, the staff is going to feel that energy and they are going to buy into it.” Put very simply by another, “ They’ve got to do what we do.” Much like some of the research cited earlier, leaders who are engaged themselves seem to be very engaging to teachers.

One interesting finding from two respondents, both teachers with over 25 years experience, was the idea that you cannot “learn” to lead effectively. They felt that certain people and personalities were good leaders and others never would be. When I asked if they felt one could learn the skills, one responded, “ No. I don’t think you can. I have seen good people in my career – lovely person, terrible admin.” She went on to state that, “ You can’t just be admin because you are booksmart.” The other teacher shared that same opinion with, “The personality makes the leader. You can’t be a good leader from a textbook; you have to be that person.” Both ladies felt that people skills and personality were key components to good leadership and leaders either had it or they did not.

**Summary**

Based on staff interviews, discussions and observations, leadership plays a huge role in maintaining or improving the engagement level of teachers. As this study focused on the areas of Teacher Development and Trust and Teamwork, teachers reinforced the importance of collaboration time, the value of a common goal/focus and the engagement that comes from the opportunity to share ideas or give input to the process. Teachers value leaders who provide the time for them to work together and feel most connected when working on a common goal. In the area of Trust and Teamwork, leadership themes that emerged from the teacher interviews included building strong relationships, the importance of recognition, and ability of a leader to capitalize on the use of teacher strengths to create a strong team who can learn from each other. Teachers in this study also cited leader authenticity as being a key component to engaging teachers. Along with being positive and enthusiastic, leaders who are genuine in their involvement and work alongside teachers as part of the team seem to motivate and increase the level of teacher engagement.

**Chapter V: Discussion**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to assess leadership strategies that are effective in creating environments that are conducive to improving/sustaining teacher engagement. Informal conversations, observations and interviews were used to gather feedback during the year to discover leadership practices that had the strongest effect on creating or maintaining a work environment that fosters teacher engagement. The study focused on two main areas: Teacher Development and Trust and Teamwork as outlined by questions 3-6 on the Gallup Q12 Survey.

From interviews with teachers, three main themes came out from their responses.

In discussing Teacher Development, teachers reinforced the importance of collaboration time, the value of a common goal/focus and the ability of a leader to capitalize on the use of teacher strengths to create a strong team. In the area of Trust and Teamwork, leadership themes that emerged from the teacher interviews included building strong relationships, the importance recognition and the engagement that comes from the opportunity to share ideas or give input to the process. Teachers in this study also cited leader authenticity as being a key component to engaging teachers as they feel engaged and motivated by leaders who are genuinely involved with them and are “real.”

**Relationship to Previous Research**

The strategies discussed in the literature review and my results revealed similar findings on the relationship between leadership behaviors and teacher engagement. Blasé and Blasé (2001) referred to the importance of promoting professional growth through professional development, collaboration and involvement in decision making, while Leithwood and Reihl (2003) and Beauchamp and Parsons (2012) mention the promotion of cooperation and working together towards a common goal when working in teams. Teachers in this study also felt engaged when they were involved in collaboration and cited a common goal or focus as being instrumental in moving forward as a team. Just as MacTavish and Kolb (2006) refer to the empowerment that comes from soliciting teacher participation in decisions, my research revealed that teachers do feel valued and empowered when they have the opportunity to offer ideas or input to school decisions.

Several authors touched on the importance of relationships and recognition. Bird et. Al, 2012), Penfold ( 2011) and Protheroe ( 2006) all refer to the impact of recognition and feedback on the engagement and well-being of teachers. My research supports this claim and all teachers involved in the study alluded to the importance of relationships and the validation that comes from being recognized by their leadership. The only other factor that seemed to come out for teachers was the importance of recognizing the strengths of staff members, accepting their differences and using them to create a strong team that capitalizes on the abilities of all.

I found it interesting that the term “authenticity” came up in so many interviews. Teachers really value a leader that is sincere and is involved at the grassroots level with the staff. This definition ties in nicely with the term “authentic leadership” that was cited by Bird et. al ( 2012) to describe leadership that is transparent and clear. Russell (2008) also refers to the contagious nature of leaders who are enthusiastic and positive, a perception that was shared by many of the teachers that were interviewed.

For the most part, my research had similar results to previous studies, which indicates that the ideas for engagement are not necessarily new, but are equally effective in this study as they were for previous authors. Teachers are engaged by leaders who provide them with the opportunities to learn and collaborate as a team while the building relationships and taking time to recognize and validate their accomplishments.

**Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited to a small sample of teachers in a French Immersion elementary school in St. Albert, Alberta. As a new administrator at the school, I had only been there a short period of time before interviewing teachers and would have likely gathered more information if the study was conducted over an extended amount of time or if I had been working at the school for a longer period of time. As well, the “novelty” of new leadership may have worn off and the responses may have been a bit different.

Another limitation to this study was the potential for interviewer bias as I was asking teachers questions about how leadership affects teacher engagement, even as I was serving as part of the leadership team. I also found that many teachers based their responses on what was happening at the school this year (with our leadership team), even as I tried to get them to generalize their responses to include experiences throughout their career that reflected engaging leadership.

Focusing on only a few select questions of the Gallup Q12 survey may also have been a limitation, as more general engagement questions may have resulted in further data that revealed effective leadership strategies in other areas.

**Suggestions for Further Studies**

Extending this research beyond one school and interviewing teachers that do not work under my leadership may provide for a wider variation of responses and experiences to draw from. It would also be interesting to hear responses from a variety of teachers in different school settings such as high school, junior high, preschool, etc to see if the results are consistent for all teachers or if some expectations of engaging leadership are school/level specific. While the Q12 measures engagement in 12 key areas, it would be interesting to ask teachers to rank the top leadership behaviors that come from this study which would help identify and pinpoint those key behaviours to integrate into practice.

Just out of curiosity based on a few responses, another interesting study would be to determine if strong leadership is, in fact, a product of personality and dynamics or if it can be developed over time. As we focus on “lifelong learning” in this profession, can one learn to lead effectively or is it truly a nature vs. nurture concept as suggested by some teachers in this study?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to assess leadership strategies that are effective in creating environments that are conducive to improving/sustaining teacher engagement. Informal conversations, observations and interviews were used to gather feedback during the year to discover leadership practices that had the strongest effect on creating or maintaining a work environment that fosters teacher engagement. The study focused on two main areas: Teacher Development and Trust and Teamwork as outlined by questions 3-6 on the Gallup Q12 Survey. This research reinforced past studies on the importance of collaboration, focusing on a common goal and teacher input as being key to engaging teachers in the area of development. Building strong relationships, offering praise and recognition and recognizing teacher strengths came out as strong predictors of engagement in the area of trust and teamwork. Leadership authenticity was a common theme for respondents that indicated that leaders who “walked the walk” with their teachers, offered a level of transparency and were “real” were very respected and engaging to teachers.

The experience of interviewing teachers and gathering their feedback on their engagement levels was powerful to me. I found that I learned much about leadership, about my own style and about the perceptions of teachers on certain leadership behaviours. In the future, I may continue to ask questions such as these to my own staff on a more informal basis to serve as a “dipstick” test on the engagement of teachers.

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