

Perceptions of Leading as Learners. Phase One: Discovery

Perceptions du leadership en tant qu'apprenants. Phase 1 : Découverte

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Article abstract

Ten school-based leaders engaged in an experimental professional learning community to understand when, during their daily practice, they placed learning (as an action) at the forefront of their leadership. This article presents the findings from the first phase (discovery) of a four-phase, two-year appreciative inquiry study. At their schools, the participants attempted to act as learners and nurture the learning process as a method of leadership. These findings suggest that when leaders are open, they are constructing leadership, they are supportive of others, and their efforts build community. One major insight encountered during the study was discovering how the technocratic organization of schooling can inhibit a leader being a learner. The aim of the study was to deepen the understanding of how school leaders approach dispositions of learning.

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Perceptions of Leading as Learners. Phase One: Discovery

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Abstract

Ten school-based leaders engaged in an experimental professional learning community to understand when, during their daily practice, they placed learning (as an action) at the forefront of their leadership. This article presents the findings from the first phase (discovery) of a four-phase, two-year appreciative inquiry study. At their schools, the participants attempted to act as learners and nurture the learning process as a method of leadership. These findings suggest that when leaders are open, they are constructing leadership, they are supportive of others, and their efforts build community. One major insight encountered during the study was discovering how the technocratic organization of schooling can inhibit a leader being a learner. The aim of the study was to deepen the understanding of how school leaders approach dispositions of learning.

Résumé

Dix leaders scolaires se sont engagés dans une communauté d'apprentissage professionnel expérimentale afin de comprendre quand, dans leur pratique quotidienne, ils placent l'apprentissage (en tant qu'action) au premier plan de leur leadership. Cet article présente les résultats de la première phase (celle de la découverte) d'une analyse positive en quatre phases étalées sur deux ans. Dans leurs écoles, les participants ont assumé le rôle d'apprenants afin de suivre un processus d'apprentissage axé sur le leadership. Les résultats obtenus suggèrent que lorsque les dirigeants demeurent

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ouverts d'esprit, ils développent leur leadership, ils soutiennent mieux les autres, et leurs efforts resserrent les liens communautaires. Une conclusion importante de cette étude a été la découverte de la manière dont l'organisation technocratique de l'enseignement peut entraver la capacité d'un dirigeant à être aussi un apprenant. L'objectif de l'étude était de mieux comprendre la perspective des leaders scolaires sur leur propre apprentissage.

Keywords / Mots clés : educational leadership, learning leadership, experimental professional learning community / leadership éducatif, leadership d'apprentissage, communauté d'apprentissage professionnel expérimentale

Introduction

This study was designed to determine whether it is possible for school-based leaders to place learning—the *action* of learning—at the forefront of their work and then describe their experience. It seems logical that learning “just happens.” After all, educational leaders, including those in my home country of Canada, are, theoretically, experts on building and sustaining learning communities. But it may not be so simple to *be a learner* who leads if individuals generally live in a pleasant state of autopilot, and the world generally inhibits being “open” and “in the moment” (Kahneman, 2011; Langer, 2016). The aim of the study was to analyze what would happen when a group of 10 school-based leaders agreed to experiment with their leadership practice by foregrounding the action of learning for themselves and others. What might they discover about themselves, their work, and the system of education? In an era of leadership when schools are meant to be all things to all people (Biesta, 2023), interesting outcomes might occur when leaders consider their primary work as the action of learning and intentionally turn their professional gaze away from care-inhibiting ideologies such as competitiveness, meritocracy, and metricization (Lynch, 2022) and redirect it. The first stage of this two-year, four-phase study was grounded in the assumption that leading a learning community involves the deployment of specific methods to help students and educators engage in an ideal form of self-cultivation for high achievement. The motivating question was: in what ways do school leaders think about and experience learning as a condition of their leadership?

The problem

The primary goal of school leaders is to recognize and maintain a community in service to learning (Dufour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Doing so sounds straightforward, but the aim of this study was for school leaders to go beyond *knowing* about learning. The study emerged from the consideration by competent educational leaders of why learning is such a slippery concept to realize. In the current educational ecosystem, the actualization of learning deserves consideration. Professional standards for achievement, social norms, neoliberal influences, and the challenges facing learners create a web of interactions that tend not to facilitate learning (Langer, 2016). Learning requires being open in the moment to transform, but conceptualizations of learning often focus on objectifying students as players in a game to be moved from the position of not knowing to that of knowing, from a state of being

unprepared to prepared. The study thus engaged with the concepts of openness, noticing novelty and being present, while meeting professional standards.

Learning

“I like who I am when I am a learner,” was a statement made by a high school principal during the first phase of this study. The comment was shared when the focus group engaged in a meta-level reflection of themselves as leaders who practice a learning mindset. The principal was expressing how being a learner had positively affected their work and life. A learner embraces openness, curiosity, and the capacity of leadership to seek out the areas of silence that are sometimes left unacknowledged or unseen (Langer, 2016). Being a learner, in this active sense, is the practice to *make* work meaningful, insightful, and productive. A principal’s work that is informed by learning, entails composing leadership in personally meaningful ways.

Understanding learning for the purposes of this article involves a social constructivist model where transformation, professionally agreed upon standards of practice, and collaboration are front and centre. In this milieu, a description of learning can be explained in three frameworks: neuroscientific processes, constructivism, and social learning.

Neuroscientific approaches to learning

Neuroscientific understandings of learning attempt to provide a clear view of brain functioning, anatomy, and molecular biology as people develop and grow. Learning itself leads to changes in the physical structures of the brain (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2008), and thought-provoking to this study is the understanding that growing dendrites and firing synapses are processes that effect energy consumption (Levy & Baxter, 2023) and therefore capacities to learn. Learning something new involves moving from a high energy state (growing dendrites) to a lower energy state when people utilize previously grown brain pathways (Levy & Baxter, 2023). Brains work to save energy by utilizing previously designed neuropathways (Doidge, 2007). These previous pathways were designed through processing stimuli filtered through a social lens. Utilizing previous pathways saves energy but also inhibits the creation of new and novel ways of perceiving phenomena and environmental contexts. Simply put, to save energy, people perceive their world in a way that is already known. But learning is a valuable action as making new sense of rich and complex environments creates rich and complex brain structures that deepen the complexities one can perceive (Bransford et al., 2008). In other words, being a learner, rather than someone who already knows, enriches the brain and one’s capacity to process future experience.

Constructivist approaches to learning

Constructivism grounds learning as a process when phenomena are understood through the learner’s past experiences, knowledges, and previous real-life interpretations (Chen & Rovegno, 2000). A constructivist paradigm centres the idea that recognizing and reflecting upon experiences is required for learning to occur. In this way, leading learning involves a purposeful approach; reflecting upon experience is paramount to developing and modelling learning. Constructivism explains learning

as a self-regulatory action where perceptions of the world are not and cannot be separate from self and the development of self (Chen & Rovegno, 2000). The notion of building or constructing knowledge as the world is experienced is paramount to the idea that phenomena, such as a principal's school day, cannot exist free from interpretation (Gadamer, 2004).

Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy illuminated the notion that for adults to learn they must be agreeable to what, when, and how they develop. Autonomy and self-regulation reinforce the nature of learning as a process of experiencing the present moment purposefully by noticing and being open and curious to discover something new (Kahneman, 2011; Langer, 2016). Long ago, Dewey (1916) reinforced the idea that reflecting on experience was a certain precursor to discovering and reinforcing meaning as learners assimilate past with present experience. This conceptualization tends to frame learning as intentionally driven and self-regulated, and in the case of this study, presents the learner as being capable of purposefully engaging a growth-minded (Dweck, 2016) disposition. Constructivist notions to learning can be routinely criticized for developing an understanding of learning where everyone's experience justifies their own truth. But in framing this study, constructivist approaches are complemented by agreed-upon standards such as curriculum and professional responsibility. The construction or discovery of understanding happens while accounting for the standards of professional leadership practice. The nature of constructivism is centred socially in both individualized and group considerations where emancipatory processes are valued as democratically considered ways of interacting define learning as a social process.

Social approaches to learning

Restak (2008) posited that while people think of themselves as independent their learning must be considered in the social context. Social norms, values, and expectations shape not just *what* a learner perceives as phenomena (Gadamer, 2004), but also *how* the world is recognized and reflected upon (Restak, 2008). Bandura (1969) explained how imitation, modelling, and social structures observably affect learning and learning patterns. In other words, what we learn, how we translate experience, and what we notice are influenced by social relations in the past and the present moment.

Learning as a social construct includes the presence of expectations, norms, and standards that can corral people toward accepted behaviour and achievement. Agreed-upon goals and conventional standards for actions, such as those present in schools, shape how and what is considered by leaders. These ways of perceiving will also create areas of silence where the world exists outside of leader perception. Social contexts of learning illuminate the presence of unconscious influences, such as cultural traditions and familial expectations, that affect how learning is perceived as people can dwell in a state of habitual autopilot (Chen & Rovegno, 2000; Langer, 2016). Perceiving from a state of habitual autopilot requires a lower energy expenditure than what is required to be open and curious and notice the world in an active state of disciplined curiosity (Kahneman, 2011). Expenditure of energy can influence the manner in which learning (or not) happens. In this case, constructivist and social learning theories can be further supported by neuroscientific concepts.

School-based leaders might be able to utilize these three conceptualisations of learning to broaden their own understandings of what it means to be a leader in an educational context. Given that, this study aimed to deepen what is known about how leadership practice can be developed and more fully understood when leaders bring learning to the front of the mind to purposefully compose their story of learning.

Learning conceptualized for this study

Therefore, in this study *learning* is defined as a process of being open in the moment to find new meaning in situations that are familiar, like a leader in practice. This purposeful disposition to learn was utilized as an antidote to habitual autopilot, or the low energy utilization of previously developed neuropathways. In this way, “knowing this already” intersects with “there might be something new to learn here.”

School leaders as experimenters and learners

Especially effective learners engage meaningfully with the curriculum and aim to become better learners. Educators are no different. Effective educational leaders position themselves to grow in the present moment, but, as has been argued above, doing so is more difficult than it might seem at first glance. The educational system holds leaders to account for managerial processes that can inhibit openness and being present. Leading for learning and even conceptualizing learning in a manner that makes sense can be challenging. Principals and researchers have sought to determine how leaders might cultivate the conditions in schools to enact learning (Harris & Jones, 2021). Simply declaring in a mission or vision statement that a school is a learning community does not make it so (Senge, 2006). In their various roles, school leaders consider multiple factors since they work in school systems that are generally predicated on both achievement and transformation (Fullan, 2017; Harris & Jones, 2021). A recent study of school principals made clear that they often fell short of purposefully bringing learning to the forefront in the day-to-day actions at their schools (Wood, 2023). Such findings indicate that principals think about leading learning but may do so in ways that are ad hoc or reactive.

School-based leaders build and influence culture, promote learning, and manage personnel and resources (Bush, 2011). Building and maintaining a learning community is a primary goal in the school community, but individuals are often pulled in directions that inhibit the process of learning. Principals, teachers, and educational support staff members face a profusion of transactional duties, such as timetabling classes and lessons, creating inclusive education plans, recording and reporting behaviour, and supervising co-curricular activities and events. Current and accepted technocratic forms of accountability have actualized and reinforced neoliberal values in public education (Biesta & Säfström, 2023), thereby ensuring that leaders focus more on policies promoting efficiency and effectiveness than on nurturing a learning mindset.

The school year often orientates the principal away from learning and toward transactional tasks and managerial processes (Wood, 2023). Tasks that reinforce the technocratic structures, such as benchmark testing, graduation checks, and specific strategies to reinforce behavioural norms at a grade level, dominate school time and conversations.

To balance managerial tasks, principals can approach learning as a mindset rather than as a set of activities, outcomes, and technical measures. But it can be difficult to find the desire and energy to focus on learning in the midst of so many other responsibilities.

Social and biological processes inhibit learning- or growth-mindedness (Dweck, 2016). It is not easy to lead by learning while remaining grounded in the transactional responsibilities of the principal. Openness, being present in the moment, and noticing new and novel elements required to lead as a learner (Langer, 2016) interrupts the habit of operating in the low-energy state of automatic response. Working in a familiar social context like a school can reinforce the habit that there is “nothing new to learn here” or “I already have this figured out.” Put another way, there is a tendency to be closed, not engage in learning, and define “I know this already” as a state of competence (Kahneman, 2011). By nature of their role, principals are especially at risk of becoming closed by their experience and past knowledge. They are expected to *know this already* because their tasks often include solving problems for others in their communities. What might be understood if, during the normal course of their day, they purposefully attempt to bring the action of learning to front of mind?

The study

A group of 10 school leaders representing three school divisions in western Canada formed an out-of-school experimental professional learning community (EPLC) with the sole purpose of thinking about learning as a factor in educational leadership. From September through May in the year after its creation, this EPLC met six times. The participants (described in detail below) shared their recent experiences and insights regarding leading for learning in their roles as principals and vice-principals. Afterward, the members of the group discussed the process of learning as a difficult but energizing aspect of a school leader’s practice.

Through these conversations, the participants formed a focus group, which catalyzed efforts to bring learning to the forefront. The participants reported that they kept learning in mind not only during the meetings of the EPLC, but also over the course of their day at their schools, simply because they would soon be talking about learning with the group.

Participants

Ten school-based leaders gave ethical consent for the author of the present article to engage in conversations with them and collect and interpret their insights and experiences. At the time of the data collection, the participants held positions as vice-principals or principals in urban and rural centres spanning three school divisions.

Table 1. Overview of the participants

Participant	School type (elementary = pre K–grade 6; secondary = grades 7–12)	Leadership role	Years of formal leadership experience
P1	Secondary	Principal	10+
P2	Secondary	Principal	10+
P3	Elementary	Vice-principal	<5
P4	Secondary	Principal	5+
P5	Elementary	Vice-principal	<5

Table 1 (continued)

Participant	School type (elementary = pre K–grade 6; secondary = grades 7–12)	Leadership role	Years of formal leadership experience
P6	Elementary	Principal	5+
P7	Secondary	Principal	<5
P8	Elementary	Principal	<5
P9	Secondary	Principal	10+
P10	Elementary	Vice-principal	<5

Purpose

Across Canada, educational leaders respond to the obligation of understanding and enacting professional standards of practice (Adams, Mombourquette, & Townsend, 2019; Alberta Education, 2023; British Columbia Principals' and Vice Principals' Association, 2019; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Ontario Institute for Educational Leadership, 2013). Such standards direct leaders to foster effective relationships, lead learning communities, build the capacity of others to learn, and model a commitment to learning. The competencies and conditions of practice are such that school leaders must embody a learning mindset. The aim of the first phase of this study was to deepen the understanding of how leaders enact a mindset that facilitates their own learning as well as the learning of others. In this regard, the study's specific objectives were

- To encourage a process of critical reflection about identity through the lens of learning within a group of school leaders;
- 0. To utilize the appreciative inquiry method to organize the study; and
- 1. To utilize the findings of the study so as to nurture a learning (as an action) mindset.

This article reports on the first phase of the four-phase study.

Justification

This qualitative study engaged with the themes of learning disposition, openness, closedness, knowing, and not knowing. The study was designed with the notion that being a school leader who learns (as an action) is difficult but required. Numerous studies have examined the conditions required for a learning community. However, what is lacking are school leader descriptions of the mindset required to learn and lead learning.

Method

Phenomenological interpretation (van Manen, 2016) and appreciative inquiry provided the method and organization used in the study (Cooperrider & Strivastada, 1987). Given the state of education in the post-pandemic world, engaging the EPLC in a manner of inquiry that would predictably increase interest, cooperation, and transformation (Cooperrider, 1986)—all of which are attributes of a functional school system (Timperley, 2011; Wood, 2023)—was a strategic choice. Appreciative inquiry focuses the attention of participants on what is going right within an organization (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2021) rather than on poor practice or deficits, while phenomenological interpretation provides a method to thematically analyze insights

from the focus group. Ethical consideration was given to utilizing and designing a process expected to energize the leaders' work. The four phases of appreciative inquiry were mapped out to show how school leaders might positively approach their work. Notably, the framework, in most instances, provided an uplifting action for the inquiry.

Appreciative inquiry is an affirmative approach to change that involves moving away from problem-solving methods in management and leads to significant transformation in areas such as cultural development, strategic planning, and survey methods (White-Zappa, 2001). The pragmatic approach situates research and theorizing at the centre of leaders' work rather than being one step removed from it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Thus, leaders' theorizing, experiencing, and voicing were the focus of the study. Appreciative inquiry involves a four-step process that begins with recognition and reflection. The following four stages of organization were planned for this two-year study.

- Discovery Phase. In the fall of 2023, the 10 participants focused on how they learned, viewed learning, facilitated learning, and understood their relationship to a learning mindset. They reflected twice a week in a personal journal and attended three focus group meetings (in August, October, and November), during which they engaged with each other in semi-structured interviews and conversations about their discoveries. The data were collected during the meetings as the participants shared their main insights from the semi-structured interviews and reflections on their discoveries regarding their efforts to bring learning to the forefront during their day-to-day practice. The data collected for this first phase are shared and discussed in this article.
- 2. Dream Phase. In the spring of 2024, the participants in the focus group planned to build on their discoveries and consider outcomes by visualizing an ideal scenario for their understandings to be enacted.
- 3. Design Phase. In the fall of 2024, the focus group planned to build on their discoveries and design a plan to embed their learning into educational leadership practice.
- 4. Destiny Phase. In the spring of 2025, the focus group will consider previous learnings to enact them in real-world school contexts.

Phenomenological analysis

A phenomenological question aims to tease understanding from lived experiences (Husserl, 2017; van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology is the study of a problem, or a moment that addresses us (Gadamer, 2004), when the aim is to better understand its nature or essence (Merleau-Ponty, 2014). This way was chosen specifically for this study about learning because this type of research requires a formal approach to both curiosity and the acceptance of lived moments as important sites to study. Phenomenology involves a way of interpreting where the researcher is open to discovering more, feigning ignorance if needed (Merleau-Ponty, 2014), as the topic of study is returned to in a cycle of noticing newness through the process of interpretation (van Manen, 2016). In this way, the method fits the topic of learning.

Data was collected by recording and transcribing participant-led semi-structured conversations. A thematic analysis in three steps (van Manen, 2016) was utilized to

describe structures of meaning. Once focus group conversations were recorded, transcriptions were wholistically read asking what is the main significance? The second step involved re-reading and asking what statements or phrases were particularly revealing about the phenomenon of learning. Lastly, single sentences were examined for specific vocabulary that would reveal the experience of learning. The ideas and experiences of school leaders are presented later in this article.

Participant-led semi-structured conversations

Participant-led semi-structured interviews and conversations were utilized for several strategic reasons. First, the focus group was organized as a professional learning community that provided the opportunity for collaborative discussions of learning. While the author of the study provided the questions and organized the format, the process of gathering and talking about learning, according to the participants, “was uplifting” and “made [us] feel energized and engaged.” Second, the collaborative synthesis of insights from semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for those *in the know* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) to describe meanings that multiple individuals may share (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The engagement with the interview questions took place between randomly selected pairs of participants who met in breakout Zoom sessions for semi-structured conversations that generally lasted one hour. The conversation consisted of answering the questions and responding to the prompts and then synthesizing the discussion to identify salient insights and ideas to bring back to the focus group. The guiding questions for the conversations included but were not limited to the following:

1. Describe what it means to be a learner.
2. Describe a moment when you witnessed/experienced learning as a purposeful way to engage a situation at your school.
3. Describe any learning leadership “a-ha moments” or insights that you have had lately.
4. Given what you have discovered so far about learning as a condition of leading, what would you say is the highest purpose of this work?

Data collection and analysis

After the interviews and conversations, the members of the EPLC shared their essential ideas with the main group. These conversations and discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed, and interpreted to identify salient moments. The process led to the co-creation of major themes that conceptualized the perceptions of leading and learning. The resulting ideas and themes were shared with the co-participants to identify any thematic interpretations that resonated and were deemed to be essential by the EPLC.

Findings

Study themes

A holistic interpretation of focus group meetings uncovered two main themes: openness in practice and systemized practice. Further analysis and interpretation revealed

that during the phase of discovery, participants, when open, engaged in a process of *leadership making* as opposed to complying to systemized expectations.

The perceptions of the leaders

The leaders participating in the EPLC agreed to spend moments during their daily practice situating learning as a primary focus of their work. They reported during the focus-group sessions that this effort was difficult *and* transformed elements of their leadership, delivering insights about openness and the commodification of time to the forefront of their decision-making. The participants incorporated learning as a deep (Fullan, 2017) way of engaging with leadership, but they also thought of learning as another transactional task added to their day. The discovery phase of this phenomenological study demonstrated that these school leaders felt clarity and relief when they connected meaningfully to learning but also that their work as formal school leaders, paradoxically, made this connection difficult. The findings and perceptions are presented in a conversational format. Participant insights and statements were shared through reflections and focus group conversations. Quotation marks, block quotes, and italics serve to depict key ideas shared by the participants as they summarized essential and meaningful group insights.

An analysis of the data of shared experiences uncovered two themes about learning as a leadership activity: 1) openness and making leadership and 2) system compliant leadership.

Openness and making leadership

Being engaged with the process of learning and discovering supported leaders to re-make their leadership practice. The socially constructivist approach to learning was reinforced when it was said being a learning leader helped “realign our practice of leading” in a process of making leadership. Participants acknowledged that while learning is “challenging, vulnerable, and satisfying work,” it can also be seen as an interruption to the day-to-day reality of complying to a school leader’s professional tasks and responsibilities. By paying attention to moments being open, participants noticed how their work environments made being a learner “more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Constructing leadership by learning

An essential finding during the discovery phase of the study concerned the important role that the EPLC group played as a catalyst for the participants’ efforts to bring a learning mindset to the forefront. Thus, one participant stated, “I believe that being part of our focus group is making me better for myself and my school community.” While the focus group certainly acknowledged challenges during the discovery phase, such as finding the time to balance their daily responsibilities, the overarching report of their experience in the group was that they were “inspired by the learning.” Purposefully focusing on learning, while challenging, provided energy, insight, and the mindset to more fully notice. One participant discussed a very public and challenging situation at his school and found that the notion of “learning at the forefront of thinking” was helpful when trying to be open to various paths to appropriate solutions. One participant expressed how focusing on learning composed a new way to

perceive the world saying, “I think [in a] pretty straightforward way learning is really, a way to see the world . . . and, it’s one that is opening [so that] you see more possibilities.” Another added, “My practice has become more intentional and consistent. I am asking myself different reflective questions on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis.”

Reflecting on practice, was identified as a cornerstone activity to purposefully enact leading while paying attention to the needs of others. A learning mindset, the group agreed, encouraged work in the school that was meaningful, and as one participant added “It’s, I think, much more enriching.” Another stated:

[Thinking about learning] helps me to reevaluate my own practice and think about how I choose to spend my day. Does it impact students? Does it impact staff? In what ways can I be more effective? How do I continue to build a culture that adults and students want to be a part of? How do I continue to build a culture of innovation, growth, kindness, and positivity?

In the day-to-day work, being open provided an entry point to more successful collaboration and co-creating solutions in a manner where participants were making and re-making their leadership practice. They discussed that in their schools as they asked questions from a position of curiosity, not only did they co-create solutions, but colleagues seemed more engaged. As one leader stated, “this is a very positive endeavour because it is helping me to feel energized within my learning when I am open and up front about learning with and from others. It also takes the pressure off [having to] ‘know’ answers.” Learning rather than only knowing was identified by all members of the focus group as a way of speaking about making leadership practice. Bringing learning to the front of mind led to new ways of thinking, as one leader stated:

I feel like I have been given permission to take time to learn and reflect in a new and purposeful way , , , reflecting on the value of “putting time into myself”—getting to know myself, feeling good in my own skin, exercise, learning—and how it impacts the experiences (learning) of others around me. Of course it has an impact on those around me! Putting that time into myself has made me more confident and vulnerable all at the same time, letting me a better model of the risk taker I promise to be.

Learning together makes community

The participants agreed that being part of the EPLC influenced their daily practice. They reported that a scheduled focus group motivated them to engage in the action of learning even though it created stress as an added obligation; in other words, a meaningful community was made. The commitment to a group was identified as a uniquely powerful motivator. Knowing that the EPLC would meet and that its members’ experiences of leading as learners would be shared helped keep the process of learning in mind. The school leaders said that this “pressure” helped them “see the world” with greater openness so that they recognized more “possibilities.” As one participant noted about the EPLC:

This opportunity allows for me to think about my own learning in a way that I don't usually do. I am so grateful to be a part of this group because I don't think there are other opportunities to engage in these conversations with other school leaders outside of formal learning. I might get together with other administrators, but conversations rarely push towards these kinds of deep questions and answers. I feel like I have been given permission to take time to learn and reflect in a new and purposeful way.

Participants welcomed the peer pressure of EPLC meetings and perceived the meetings as more than a simple accountability measure. Learning leadership and working in a system that seemingly inhibited learning motivated the formation of the focus group, and curiosity about being a learner drove the participants' intentions. As one school leader shared, "I think that my involvement in these conversations has forced me to consider which attributes my actions show I value and to not only identify learning [and] leading as one of these but to move it to the forefront as beneficial for our whole community of learners."

The participants described feeling relief when they focused on learning, both individually and in their schools, and connected with the meaningful reasons they, as one school leader stated, "got into education in the first place." They were excited to be working in a professional community of like-minded experimenters and were enthusiastic about listening to and sharing with one another. For them, the EPLC was a place to "talk about what is real in education."

Reflecting on learning drew attention to how difficult the process is to enact and how the system of education inhibits being a learner. The participants described feeling surprised when they recognized that their many expected responsibilities inhibited open conversations about learning with their colleagues. When these conversations did occur, however, they reported very positive consequences, such as "engagement, energy," and a "sense of relief that I can focus on what really matters." The EPLC highlighted the notion that learning can be both a relief when achieved and a stressor when thought about separately from responsibilities. As one leader stated, "It is sometimes a challenge to always feel like I'm enough. After meeting with the focus group, I am always inspired by the learning."

A higher purpose for learning

The group's understanding of learning as a state of being evolved during phase one. At the beginning of the study, learning was defined as a "process" or "product" or the action of supporting one's own or others' "growth." In this first phase of the study, the notion began to emerge that, for most of the members of the group, learning was transforming into a meaningful way of being. As one member put it, "being a learner and experiencing learning is the way that I desire to live my life." Another added:

There is a call to move forward towards an ideal of improvement and fulfillment that is always just over the horizon—we know we may not ever realize where we may want to end but that what really matters is our forward movement.

The participant leaders found that bringing learning to the forefront constructed how they viewed their work and their colleagues and mindfully reset the management of school responsibilities. They described this re-make as an opportunity to examine their perceptions about how, or if, they mindfully engaged their work and life. For some of the participants, the limited time available to manage their tasks or fulfill their expected responsibilities meant that being a learner was difficult, but illuminated a desire to approach their work. As one said in the EPLC, being a learner “is how I want to live my life. Not separating the role of principal and being human.” Another principal added:

I desperately want to grow, be better, and not be stagnant. Not for me necessarily (although that’s an added benefit), but for the good of the people I love and serve. It’s away for me to be a better version of myself (to learn, if you will) how to more effectively help others achieve growth and their own potential.

The discovery that “this work is about being authentically who we are” was transformative for the members of the EPLC. Those who reported being able to bring learning to the forefront discovered that “leading as a learner is a more enriching way to spend time in the profession.”

Learning as a leader

Learning something entails entertaining the possibility that one does not see every aspect of a situation or context. This can ease the worry about being competent during complex situations, and instead encourages the principal to lead toward co-created solutions. Co-creation was named as a respectful way to interact professionally with colleagues. As one participant added, modelling being open to others’ solutions, demonstrates “deep respect and care. That means being open to their perspective. Like truly open to it.”

Being a learner is often thought of as the process of understanding and resolving novel or upsetting situations. However, during the mundane moments of the day, bringing learning purposefully forward provided the members of the EPLC with a unique way to engage with others and remain open to something new. As one participant stated, being a learner at school is “a way for me to be a better version of myself (to learn, if you will) how to more effectively help others achieve growth and their own potential.” During these incidents, the leaders understood how to “model learning for others in the school.”

The participants in the EPLC agreed that learning deepened their consideration of others, perhaps because they were able to see their roles through a wider lens and recognize that “being a learner means coming at life from a position of humility.” The participants questioned their viewpoints prior to phase one and found that, as learners, they paid closer attention to their colleagues’ contexts and needs. One participant stated that this new insight caused her to question whether she had “even believe[d] in hearing another’s perspective” previously. This change in perception was not limited to their interactions with their colleagues; the leaders considered what it means to be a student as well. One noted that “it takes a lot of risk for students to engage in learning.” Another added that “sometimes we forget what it is like to be a student,” and being a learner while leading provided the reminder.

One participant stated that the highest purpose of leading in a school was to be “moving together in a constant state of improvement.” Among their other tasks and responsibilities, it was in the action of learning that they felt best about themselves and their work. One member of the focus group stated that, when she put learning at the forefront, she “can’t wait to get back to school the next day because the work means so much personally.” As a leader, she explained, “being a learner is opening. You see more possibilities compared to [being] top-down when you just say how it is.” Being open to the potential in others’ ideas shows that colleagues “are all growing and searching for better. We are coming together to try and understand and respond to the needs of students.”

However, putting time aside to learn with others was not always easily justified, and seeing learning as an activity separate from their tasks and responsibilities proved difficult for the EPLC. One participant observed, “my colleague mentioned that she almost feels guilty sometimes when she is thinking about learning” because it makes the job seem enjoyable. Several of the members received unfavourable comments from colleagues when they engaged in learning because it seemed out of place. Several of the school leaders perceived that they were being judged by their colleagues who wondered whether they “were working at all” as they engaged in conversations grounded in learning.

System compliant leadership

Being compliant to the professional expectations and responsibilities predicated by the job of school leadership drew the attention of the participants. One of the stark realizations that emerged was that the action of learning was conceptualized by the participants and their colleagues as an add on to their work. They noted that they had to schedule time to be learners, which was no easy task. This realization brought with it an understanding of how the work of an instructional leader inhibits learning. “The challenge is, of course, time,” as one participant stated, adding, “and allowing myself to prioritize my own learning over the other tasks that lay ahead.” Another participant added:

I think the challenges really come down to getting stuck in aspects of the role that seem to gobble up time to reflect and which can force us into learning to accommodate vs learning as leading (getting stuck in things that seem urgent but may not be important).

The need to schedule time specifically for learning illuminated how the day-to-day work of being a formal school leader can inhibit growth and open learning conversations. The EPLC found purposeful learning was difficult unless they connected it with the day-to-day professional responsibilities and tasks associated with management. This is a key finding.

Two of the participants in the EPLC were unable to attend the last discovery phase meeting because of unanticipated professional responsibilities. The two principals shared that they were challenged to find time to focus on learning and spoke of the pressure to first focus on managerial tasks. Both expressed concern about letting the focus group down and shared that the reality of their work made it unrealistic for them to prioritize thinking about, reflecting on, and meeting to discuss

learning. They offered to leave the study after phase one but were encouraged to continue. Each member of the focus group recognized the difficulty of discovering moments of learning and the paradox that being a leader in a school setting made learning and focusing on learning difficult.

While three evening meeting dates were agreed on in the months prior to phase one, several of the participants in the EPLC missed part or all of a meeting for various reasons. Some of them hosted emergent parent gatherings, attended division meetings, covered for sick coaches, prioritized family, or simply forgot. Thus, the learning in the EPLC proved difficult to schedule and prioritize uniformly even when the participants were willing to attend. In some ways, bringing learning to the forefront was viewed as one more item on a leader's task list. As one participant said, "I just don't have the time in my day to bring learning forward." Even though prioritizing learning proved challenging, the participants reported that phase one was a transformational process for their understanding of leadership when "being open was meaningful" and "being a learner and experiencing learning is the way that I desire to live my life as a human. I know it sounds so cheesy."

Conclusion

The school leaders in this exploratory study experienced openness during their leadership practice as they contended with the expectations of their organizations. This illuminated a tension between leading learning and scheduling time to comply with expectations outside of learning. In theory, the work of learning is at the centre of every school leader's professional practice. Phase one of this study demonstrated that, when this is the case, an educational leader's work has meaning and is joyful. The 10 school-based leaders involved in this study attested, first, that their many responsibilities made focusing on learning difficult and, second, that, when learning was brought to the forefront of their thinking, they had strong positive feelings about their work and themselves. They described being a learner in the moment as a state of being in which they were open to noticing and finding novelty, giving space for others to be included in their thinking, and creating opportunities to lead in meaningful ways. These considerations diverted their focus from "getting it right" toward engagement with ideas and others (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins 2020). In these instances, no member of the EPLC reported that the outcome was negative.

The members of the EPLC agreed that being a school leader is difficult personally and professionally, but that was not a cause for concern as they understood that their role by nature is constantly changing. However, they did mention the difficulties of mitigating a technocratic enterprise such as schooling (Rogers, 2017) while supporting others in the same prospect of learning. They identified learning as a way of being that seemed to be at the heart of educational leadership in terms of fostering an environment in which teachers thrive and students find success. Lastly, the EPLC was identified as both a catalyst for bringing learning to mind and a space in which experiences can be shared. While scheduling time to meet proved difficult, the participants in the study described the EPLC as a key factor in bringing learning to the forefront of their thinking.

In an era in which school leaders and educational leadership scholars are contemplating how to serve the needs of both the system and those who play roles in it (Wood, 2023), learning seems to provide an intersection between tasks and how they are engaged by people. The members of the EPLC reported that being a learner increased their resilience and helped them find personal meaning. Deepening their understanding of learning, in this case, helped them to develop an ethical stance conducive to leading a school. The next phases of the study begin the process of exploring how these insights into learning and leadership can be applied.

In conclusion, as this work engaging the lived reality of learning and leadership continues, some insights and recommendations are provided for those responsible for education policy, leader education, and educational governance. Professional leadership standards simply must include protocols that help leaders both bring learning to front of mind and belong to groups where the nature of learning (as an action) can be discussed separately from the discourse of effectiveness and efficiency. It is through these two actions that leaders can make meaningful decisions for students and colleagues as well as build a leadership practice that brings life to their work.

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