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Halfway Tree in Winter



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Eric Lowe
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The 85-foot eastern cottonwood Halfway Tree marks the midpoint between Brandon and Winnipeg on the Trans-Canada Highway. It is the remaining one of two trees planted by farmer Fred Archer in 1919 to memorialize the loss of his wife and newborn in childbirth.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the forty-first issue of the *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, devoted to rural, northern, and Indigenous education. Our authors for volume 18 are current and past BU Faculty of Education graduate students. I thank these educators for sharing their professional experiences.

- Carlee Quiring's refereed article explains the essential components of crisis planning in schools.
- Jamie Hall's refereed article examines the difficult process of separating a learning disability from language acquisition in English language learners.
- Jennifer Griegson's refereed article advocates using technology in education, including AI, with digital literacy training for both teachers and students.
- Amber Lawrence's refereed article explores school leaders' responsibility to develop cultures of change.
- Madison Carter-Plouffe's refereed article investigates school leadership engagement through a transformational leadership lens.
- Odette Megalaa's refereed article examines research reports of the relationship between teachers' mental health and the academic performance of their students.
- Gavin Taylor's refereed article extols the importance of providing career development education for high school students.
- Alyssa Spacek's refereed article stresses the role of school administrators in supporting students as co-constructors of the learning environment.
- Shannon Ploegman Smith's refereed article discusses student belonging as a foundational factor influencing well-being, engagement, and academic success in secondary schools.
- Mavis Abotsi's special interest paper explores context-sensitive strategies to strengthen coaching and mentoring for novice teachers in rural and remote areas of Ghana.

Also included in this issue is our "Celebration of Scholarship," to honour graduate students who completed their M.Ed. degrees with theses in 2025.

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REFEREED ARTICLES

Crisis Management in Education

Carlee Quiring

Abstract

Crisis planning in educational environments is essential for ensuring the safety and continuity of learning when emergencies arise. Effective preparation requires understanding how risks affect school systems and developing procedures for prevention, response, and recovery. Because students spend significant time in school, comprehensive emergency planning is needed to reduce harm and support well-being. For individuals in leadership roles, familiarity with crisis procedures is essential to ensure coordinated action during crisis situations in the school. Schools worldwide rely on structured crisis management to maintain safety, communication, and coordinated action during both real and false alarms.

In an ever-changing world, people are encouraged to plan for the worst-case scenario. In an educational setting, planning for the worst-case scenario involves much more. It's planning for that moment when the fire alarm goes off in the middle of winter or when an unknown person is walking through your school. Planning for an emergency involves thinking about how to prevent an emergency and then developing a plan for all possible situations that go beyond everyday business. Children spend much of their time at school, and making planning for an emergency a priority will help to decrease the risk and suffering of students when they are in educators' care (Shah et al., 2020, p. 1). Crisis management planning in educational buildings is a fundamental piece of work that needs to be done for those worst-case scenario moments.

A crisis is a "an event that causes severe emotional and social distress occurring at any time with warning" (MacNeil & Topping, 2007, p. 65). When you are looking at it from an educational lens the definition changes ever so slightly but with the same message "a crisis refers to any unforeseen event that poses a significant threat to safety, well-being or normal functioning of the school" (Shanganall, 2024, Understanding Crisis Management section, para. 1). Strawser (2023) explains that the main examples of crisis situations could include natural disasters, safety incidents, public health emergencies, or data breaches. When educational institutes are planning for emergencies, four steps must be considered: prevention, planning, response, and recovery. Emergencies are scary, especially for children, and being prepared for any given scenario is necessary to make sure things run as smooth as possible, to ensure people know their roles and to prioritize the safety and well-being of staff and students at school.

Prevention

Prevention is the act of taking steps to identify the potential risks in a school and taking preventative steps to limit or eliminate those threats (MacNeil & Topping, 2007, p. 71). Depending on where you are in the world will determine what types of risks you are planning for. Crisis management teams in California schools will be planning for much different risks than those in Winnipeg. Both have equally important but completely different situations. Once a crisis team has identified the risks, they walk through how they could eliminate the problems. This could mean little changes to a certain room in the school or equipping the school with a certain safety measure to limit or eliminate the identified risk. By understanding the threats and risks associated with your building, you can start planning for the time when these threats become a reality.

Planning

The next stage in the crisis management process is planning. Planning is arguably the most important step in the process. It is when all potential threats become a reality and administrators are planning for the way out within the chaos that is an emergency. There are three parts to the planning phase. First there is planning for the crisis. Planning for the crisis includes thinking about what steps will be taken when the situation occurs, finding safe places for staff and students to be either inside or outside the school, and anticipating the many scenarios that could play out (Shanganall, 2024). Second there is communication. This includes communicating to everyone in the building where the safety plans are, determining how and when you will communicate in the middle of a crisis, and identifying who you need to communicate with when a situation occurs. Without pre-established procedures for sharing critical details there may be confusion from staff, students and parents when a crisis occurs. Taking care of this before a crisis occurs leaves less room for errors (Strewser, 2023). The final step in planning is practising. You can make all the plans in the world, but if you have not practised what you planned then no one is going to know what to do. A crisis is scary, especially for the children who may be present. When you practise a plan, students and staff can see the plan in action and when it comes time for the real thing, they will have some sense of what to do.

Response and Recovery

The last two steps of the crisis management plan are response and recovery. Response involves “the prompt implementation of effective actions and the mobilization of appropriate resources” (MacNeil & Topping, 2007, p. 82). In the response phase, staff and students use the knowledge they received in the planning phase and put it into action. The three objectives of the response phase are “developing options based on information gathered, selecting the appropriate responses, and implementing these” (MacNeil & Topping, 2007, p. 82). If people are doing their jobs, know where to go and can understand where to communicate, then they will be able to follow through with the response phase.

Recovery is picking up the pieces when the crisis is over. Recovery is arguably one of the most important phases even though it happens after the fact. Strewser (2023) explained three aspects of evaluation after a crisis occurs: assessing the response strategies and plans, gauging the emotional toll the crisis took on the affected people, and identifying areas for improvement. Evaluating the response strategies examines whether the plan worked within a real emergency compared to what was anticipated. Gauging the emotional toll considers the emotional trauma that may have ensued and contemplates bringing in supports to help staff and students cope with their experiences. The support details, and whether school based or outside support, may be different depending on the crisis (Sokol et al., 2024). Finally, identifying areas for improvement looks at making changes to make the response flow smoother next time there is a crisis (Shah et al., 2020). If plans are not revisited after a crisis occurs, then staff and students are just going to be doing the same thing every time even if there was something wrong with the plan. Correcting problems in the plan helps to ensure that every detail of the revised plan works in favour of the people in the building.

Conclusion

In my role as teacher designate at my school, the act of planning for a crisis does not fall on me, but the steps to implement it could. When our principal is away I am in charge, and if an emergency happened to occur while she is gone, I would be the one carrying out the plan. Knowing the appropriate steps to take during a crisis is essential to making sure staff and

students are safe. We have talked about what the different plans are, how I would implement them and where to find them in the office in the event I would need them. My goal while in the role of teacher designate is to make sure our school is safe, the students are looked after, and staff are aware of what is going on. By having these plans, I can do this even when there is an emergency and our principal is away.

No one wants to be in a crisis; it is not a version of school that breathes safe and secure, but from time to time there could be a false alarm or a real thing. We see schools all over the world respond to crisis after crisis, putting their plans into action. It is because of these plans that schools are able to respond in a way that keeps as many students and staff members as safe as possible in the face of the unthinkable. Planning for a crisis is an essential piece of educational planning. It is the piece that keeps everyone safe and informed before a crisis occurs, and enables them to execute the plan when and if the time comes.

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About the Author

During her M.Ed. degree, Carlee Quiring was the Teacher Designate at her school. She was concerned about what was required to be prepared for a crisis. Talk in Carlee's graduate classes about disasters, policy, and situations that had occurred peaked her interest to explore the research about what it means to be prepared for the worst.

Differentiating Between a Learning Disability and Language Acquisition in English Language Learners

Jamie Hall

Abstract

This paper examines the difficult process of differentiating a learning disability from language acquisition in English language learners (ELLs). This is important for the academic success of ELLs because they can either be misdiagnosed with learning disabilities or have learning disabilities go undiagnosed. Although there is no universal method or assessment available to discern between a learning disability and language acquisition in ELL students, there are important components to consider through the diagnostic process. The author concludes that through adequate learning opportunities including observation, first language acquisition, relevant history, collaboration, and ongoing assessment, educators and clinicians should be able to either rule out or diagnose a learning disability in ELL students.

Learning a language is difficult. Even more difficult is learning a new language on top of learning difficulties, a different alphabet, culture shock, trauma, or gaps in education. This is something English language learners (ELLs) may experience in school. As such, it is often difficult to tell whether an ELL student has a learning disability or is having trouble just with language acquisition. Although it sounds paradoxical, there is both a problem with overrepresentation and underrepresentation of ELLs with learning disabilities (Klingner et al., 2006; Stutzman & Lowenhaupt, 2022). There is overrepresentation when students are erroneously identified as having a learning disability when they are having problems or delays with language proficiency instead. There is underrepresentation when educators hesitate to assess and diagnose a learning disability because they want to give more time for language development and assume that students are getting sufficient linguistic skills in the classroom. One of the most difficult tasks teachers and psychologists have when it comes to ELLs is distinguishing between a learning disability and language acquisition difficulties. The level of difficulty increases when it is a refugee ELL student. Although there is no universal method or assessment available to distinguish between a learning disability or language acquisition in ELL students, there are important components to consider through the diagnostic process. Through observation, first language acquisition, relevant history, collaboration, and ongoing assessment, educators and clinicians should be able to either rule out or diagnose a learning disability in ELL students.

Diagnosing the Learning Issue

ELLs are often misdiagnosed with a learning disability because they share the same characteristics. When considering academic characteristics, for example, both ELLs and students with learning disabilities struggle with comprehension, following directions, and completing tasks (Chu & Flores, 2011). ELLs and students with learning disabilities also share behavioural characteristics. For example, they both may have low motivation and self-esteem (Chu & Flores, 2011), or become easily frustrated when their comprehension breaks down (Hudson, 2019; Orosco & O'Connor, 2014). Identifying a learning disability is important because students who receive support from diagnosed learning disabilities earlier benefit more than those who have delays in their diagnosis (Rhinehart et al., 2022). This support is why some schools want to move forward quickly with assessment. It can be expected that ELLs "will not initially be at age/grade appropriate levels of English language development" (Manitoba

Education, 2021, p. 10). This justifies giving ELLs sufficient time to learn before an assessment occurs.

It is even more challenging to distinguish between language acquisition difficulties and a learning disability in refugee ELL students. Refugee students may come with little or no education in their first language (Hudson, 2019). Other difficulties refugee students may encounter include “psychological, social, or emotional complications resulting from trauma, persecution, political upheaval, or war” that can also impact their learning and language acquisition (Hudson, 2019, p. 162). Regardless of whether the ELL student is an immigrant or a refugee, there are some guidelines to follow that will help in the diagnostic process for a learning disability.

When ELL students seem to have prolonged difficulty with academics, the first step in the diagnostic process should be classroom observation. Without this observation, it is difficult to determine whether a student has had enough of an opportunity to learn language before a referral for assessment occurs (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Manitoba Education (2021) specifies that time and opportunities for learning must take place “before any decisions are made about student achievement” (p. 11). Observation of the student in social situations with their peers could also be important. This observation can provide information on the student’s language development and executive functioning skills, which is important in differentiating what type of problem the student is having (Farnsworth, 2018). If there is sufficient language development work taking place in the classroom, then students could potentially have a learning disability. If it is determined that there is insufficient language development in the classroom, resource teachers could provide suggestions for more explicit instruction in class before any referrals for a learning disability occur.

A crucial aspect of differentiating between language acquisition or a learning disability is how the student learns in their first language. ELLs with learning disabilities will experience the same academic difficulties in their first language as well as in English (Garcia & Tyler, 2010; Rhinehart et al., 2022). About 80% of all students with learning disabilities are diagnosed with a reading disability (Garcia & Tyler, 2010, p. 114). Since most students with learning disabilities struggle with reading, ELL students are likely to have struggled with reading in their first language. Therefore, schools must invite families in to gather background information on their first language.

An important part of the diagnostic process is to discuss the student’s relevant history. The family should be involved to share in this information gathering. Some of this information gathering should happen during the EAL intake process, as outlined in the *Assessment of EAL and LAL Learners* (Manitoba Education, 2021) document. An important question to ask families is whether the student had delayed speech as a toddler (Farnsworth, 2018). Another important part of gathering information on the student’s history is to ask about any interruptions in their education (Farnsworth, 2018). As well, the background information gathered needs to be reflective of the student’s culture (WIDA, 2023). It is important to get the family’s cultural views and knowledge of the suspected disability (WIDA, 2023). Background information on linguistics for each language should also be considered. ELLs without learning disabilities may still have “difficulties with phonological awareness distinguishing sounds not in their L1” (Hudson, 2019, p. 160). A problem with this gathering of background data is that families that are newer to Canada will often hesitate to answer honestly unless they feel comfortable and confident in doing so (Chu & Flores, 2011). This background information may not be available in a student’s file. Thus, it is important to build strong relationships and gather data through the family to share with the school team.

Collaboration with professionals is also essential through the diagnostic process. For example, the team should involve the family, the classroom teachers, the resource teacher, the school psychologist, other relevant educators, and any related outside agencies. This collaboration will ensure that nothing is looked at in isolation. Collaboration will also streamline

the process (WIDA, 2023). Since ELLs with learning disabilities can look different in different educational settings and contexts, it is important that all the professionals involved share their perspectives. Working as a team helps foster a supportive and safe school experience for families dealing with ELLs. When people feel comfortable, they are likely to share more information and honest answers.

Arguably the most common way to identify a student with a learning disability is through assessment. Educators and clinicians must take caution when using standardized assessment. The problem with standardized assessment is that ELLs are usually not included in normative samples (Chu & Flores, 2011). These standardized assessments may have unintentional content and linguistic bias. A solution could be more informal assessment done over time because ELLs generally make consistent errors, while students with learning disabilities generally make inconsistent errors (Hudson, 2019). If ELL students are assessed only with a discriminatory test, then it may incorrectly appear as a learning disability.

Another problem with relying only on an English language standardized assessment as a means of diagnosing ELLs for a learning disability is that it may end up measuring the wrong content. It can become an assessment of the student's English language skills rather than an assessment of their true abilities (Klingner & Harry, 2006; Manitoba Education, 2021; Wagner et al., 2005). Almost all assessments contain language. For example, language is usually used in the directions of an assessment, even when it is assessing nonverbal skills (Manitoba Education, 2021, p. 2). In addition, many students appear to be proficient in English before they have academic language proficiency (Klingner & Harry, 2006). ELLs must be given sufficient time to learn the English language. It can take up to seven years to develop proficiency in English (Klingner & Harry, 2006). Refugee ELL students with limited or no prior schooling may take even longer to develop proficiency in the English language (Hudson, 2019). Educators must understand that learners "develop at different rates and some students require more time to achieve specific outcomes" (Manitoba Education, 2021, p. 10). If ELL students are tested based only on their proficiency in English, then it may incorrectly appear as a learning disability.

Since ELLs with learning disabilities struggle in their first language as well as any additional language they may be learning, students need to be assessed in their first language to rule out any language acquisition difficulties. Due to the sheer number of different languages, language specific assessments for each standardized assessment do not exist (Chu & Flores, 2011). Besides English, an assessment may often have Spanish or French available, but that is it. An interpreter could potentially be an option. The interpreter would have to be trained in both the language and content, as well as the specific assessment, to interpret the results as close to accurate as possible. It is unrealistic to have such a skilled interpreter available for different locations, languages, and assessments. A solution to help offset some of these problems with assessment could be training more school psychologists who are bilingual or multilingual (Rhinehart et al., 2022). When possible, we must assess students in their first language as well as English to rule out or diagnose any learning disabilities.

Providing Appropriate Supports

If ELL students are correctly diagnosed with a learning disability, educators can support these students the same way they would for any learner. Teachers can follow a Universal Design for Learning framework in their classrooms to support all students, including those with or without a diagnosis (Delaney & Hata, 2020). Adaptations and scaffolding are best practices to support struggling students (Garcia & Tyler, 2010). Possible adaptations may include using speaking and listening more than reading and writing, reducing the amount of work, allowing more time for work, or changing the testing formats. Scaffolding lessons that explicitly teach reading comprehension skills, study skills, or build language development will support students who need extra help. This explicit instruction is especially important in the higher grades because most often it is assumed that these skills have been learned. Explicit instruction is

needed when working with ELLs with learning disabilities because they have difficulties with processing, memory, and attention (Wei et al., 2022). Frequent and explicit instruction for language and vocabulary development is also needed to support ELLs with learning disabilities (Klingner et al., 2014). If schools, classrooms, and teachers effectively and explicitly teach academic and language skill development to our ELLs, then there will be fewer students in question for assessment.

ELLs must also learn in a culturally responsive learning environment. A culturally responsive learning environment connects culture to new learning, is thoughtful of students' prior knowledge, and facilitates students to share their culture and knowledge with others (Nguyen, 2012). Culturally responsive education will not only develop a student's second or additional language, but will also promote language development in their first language (Orosco & O'Connor, 2014; Wei et al., 2022). ELLs with learning disabilities are an at-risk group for experiencing academic failures and low motivation (Wei et al., 2022). As such, they could benefit from culturally responsive education.

Conclusion

Overall, care and caution should be taken when deciding between language acquisition problems or a learning disability in ELL students. It is important that the diagnosis of a learning disability for ELL students "should be based on students having received an adequate opportunity to learn" (Klingner et al., 2006, p. 124). These adequate learning opportunities can be determined through observation, first language history, gathering data on relevant history, collaboration, and non-discriminatory assessment of ELLs. Finally, it is important to remember that even correctly labelling ELL students with learning disabilities can be subjective. For instance, the very definition of a disability changes over time depending on "which definition and identification criteria are used and on the contexts in which such decisions are made" (Klingner et al., 2006, p. 123). What matters most is that the students who struggle receive the supports they need to be successful in school and in life. When educators and clinicians respond in an appropriate manner, it will result in accurate diagnoses of ELLs with learning disabilities.

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About the Author

Jamie Hall is a high school teacher in Brandon, Manitoba. Jamie completed her Bachelor of Arts and her Bachelor of Education at Brandon University. Currently, she is a first-year graduate student in the Master of Education program at Brandon University, in the inclusive education stream.

Education in a Rapidly Evolving Digital Era

Jennifer Greigson

Abstract

The use of technology, including AI, in education should be planned for and implemented intentionally and for specific purposes related to learning goals, not just because it is the latest trend or due to marketing pressures. Teachers should be provided with ongoing training for technology products and professional development about teaching digital literacy and helping students thrive in a new digitally augmented reality. Since technology is changing so quickly, it is important for students to learn to think critically about how digital spaces affect local and global citizenship. Artificial intelligence is creating many issues related to academic integrity, but may have positive uses to lessen teacher burnout and this deserves careful consideration.

The use of technology in education is a rapidly evolving endeavor that necessitates flexible and forward thinking from schools, districts, and educators. Digital devices and platforms are an intertwined part of life for everyone, and young people especially are living with the societal implications (Veldhuis et al., 2024). It is urgent for young people to develop digital literacy and greater critical thinking abilities associated with living in a digitally connected society.

Districts and administrators are faced with extensive marketing campaigns from a massive field of educational sales agents who are well-versed in technological jargon meant to make decision makers feel pressured to buy products because of promises of transforming education, making students smarter, and making teachers' jobs a breeze. While it is true that technology does have uses that assist student learning and can help to lighten the load of teachers who are feeling worn down and burnt out, districts and schools must proceed with caution because technology can become more of a burden for teachers if it is not planned for and used well.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly evolving with many good, proven, and productive uses. Using AI in an educational setting though carries complex considerations associated with academic integrity (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). A quick google search returns a plethora of AI options for making presentations, generating texts, proofreading essays, and many more tasks. The problem is that using these tools without direct, clear parameters does not help students to meet learning goals, and the accuracy and usefulness of the tools are questionable at best.

Technology brings opportunity for new learning tools, but it is up to everyone in the educational system to know the challenges and potential pitfalls of using them. To that end, building digital literacy into classroom lessons is becoming increasingly important.

The Urgent Need To Develop Student Digital Literacy

Technological progress has been changing how we live, work, and learn for decades. Increasingly, people are using digital tools regularly for work, entertainment, communication, and access to services (Tiernan et al., 2023). Therefore, it is imperative for educators to provide digital citizenship lessons about how technology can be used appropriately, responsibly, and in a user empowered manner. To do this, teachers must teach students about nine digital themes: access, commerce, communication/collaboration, etiquette, fluency, health/welfare, law, rights/responsibilities, and security and privacy (Ribble, 2023). These themes complicate active digital citizenship in a globalized world (Monteiro et al., 2022).

How humans relate to each other as local and global citizens is changing due to the new concept of pseudo-connections of socializing through social media and online spaces, often in an anonymous manner. Students need to learn about how deepfakes have an impact, and how the pervasiveness of generative adversarial networks cause issues of biases (Veldhuis et al., 2024). Together these social digital connections and influences change how we see,

understand, care for, and even criticize each other. The digital, globalized world has opened new doors for positive active citizenship, but it has also produced new challenges related to citizens' civic and political practices through online spaces (Monteiro et al., 2022).

Another aspect of digital citizenship is the radical dimension. Radical digital citizenship prompts teachers to help students critically analyze social, political, economic, and environmental impacts of technology and encourage them to work collaboratively to address issues of tech-related inequalities and injustices (Emejulu & McGregor, 2019). An example may be teaching students about how big technology companies buy up blocks of housing and businesses in low-income neighborhoods at very low prices, effectively displacing people who may have no other place to go. Another lesson could be about how AI's use of enormous servers and data centers consumes a massive amount of fresh water and electricity, which has long lasting environmental impacts. In our digital era, physical and online spaces have become intertwined and augment each other, so we must teach our students about both and how they are interconnected, instead of focusing on just one side (Jurgenson, 2012).

It is urgent that educators equip students with greater knowledge of online spaces and digital literacy, and how technology is linked to citizenship, so that they are better set up to be critical thinkers and problem solvers for a future that currently seems very uncertain.

Influences of Business Marketing on the Use of Educational Technology

No matter the educators' role, they have at their disposal numerous technology tools that come linked with promises of making learning easier, faster, or better in some way. The economic field often referred to as EdTech is a global, multi-billion dollar, competitive, and highly adaptive industry (Williamson, 2022). Listening to sales pitches, leafing through catalogues, and trying to stay at the forefront of technology is an ongoing demand for districts, schools, and teachers. Many new digital technologies are talked about in an exaggeratedly positive manner, and the marketing rhetoric around the products push that learning is happening because of the technology itself (Selwyn, 2015). Teachers, by nature, want what is best for their students, and the weight of spending limited budget dollars wisely is heavy when faced with decisions related to tech products that often come with hefty price tags.

Due to budget constraints, marketing pressures, company promises, parental pressures, product availability, and compatibility with current technology, school districts make decisions around tech purchases that may not be purely with student benefit in mind. Often, in pursuit of higher test scores, better reputation, or other goals, school districts are too quick to sign on for the latest and greatest technology offering (Tutt, 2024). The latest and greatest tech gadgets are often touted as revolutionary or the key to academic success by companies, but introducing tech to schools is much more complicated than just purchasing and using the products.

Although digital tools are increasingly being implemented in schools, the challenge comes from making sure the technologies are appropriate, linked to learning goals in some way, and a useful resource. Teachers must be trained and prepared to utilize technologies purposefully and integrated with teaching approaches (Lavicza et al., 2022). They must be trained with the hardware and software, and find ways to plan, select, and use tech tools to facilitate meaningful learning experiences (Kolb, 2017).

Students spend a great deal of time in online spaces. It naturally follows that teachers and students should be equipped with appropriate tech learning tools that increase everyone's knowledge of the digitally augmented world.

Complex Considerations of Artificial Intelligence Related to Education

Questions of academic integrity are at the heart of many conversations involving AI as teachers grapple with how to design assignments such that technology may augment student work without replacing student voice, ideas, and creativity. In traditional education settings, AI

creates complex issues (Balalle & Pannilage, 2025). This non-human element complicates how content is consumed and produced, and demands that critical inquiry become part of the interaction, such as questioning who built the platform (Veldhuis et al., 2024).

If students spend hours consuming AI-generated content, it becomes challenging for them to distinguish real from fake and to achieve an authenticity of creation that can only come from a human being. Fortunately, there are many tools and resources available for teachers to teach students about how to determine the validity of a photo, video, or written word. To dig into these sometimes-tough topics, a learning environment must be one which fosters critical thinking. This requires a strong teacher-student trusting relationship and underscores the urgency for developing digital literacy.

A teacher must be keenly aware of how students are using technology during class time and to complete assignments because if they are granted use of various tech tools, including AI, it may appear that students are actively engaged, being physically present, and completing tasks while in reality they may be disengaged from the actual learning goals (Kolb, 2017). It is very important for educators to create a culture of transparent, engaged learning. Educators are desperately attempting to uphold academic integrity in a technological world that is evolving at a pace to which educational institutions cannot adapt (Lavicza et al., 2022). Districts, governments, and postsecondary teacher training institutions need to increase discussions and strategies around the role of technology and AI in classrooms and schools so that the systems can be better built to support the increasingly difficult job teachers are facing in this regard.

Despite the apprehension and downfalls of AI, there are ways that AI can help students and teachers and potentially help curb the high levels of teacher burnout. With proper knowledge and training, teachers could use reputable AI tools to summarize text, adjust reading levels, create stories, and create multiple choice questions. The product is created in a matter of seconds, which then requires time for human analysis and revision (Ferlazzo, 2025). If AI can complete some of the more mundane tasks, that could leave teachers with more energy and motivation to focus on more important tasks. At the heart of meaningful education systems, digital or not, are curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking (Chen, 2025). This is especially true for navigating the conversations around the use of AI with integrity.

Conclusion

Although technology advancements may present different learning tools, districts and educators must be wary of the challenges and concerns of these platforms and products. Artificial intelligence is a topic of many conversations in the academic field as educators and districts wrestle with how to maintain academic integrity in the face of readily available short-cut tools that students may access rather than thinking, analyzing, and creating on their own.

Marketing campaigns in the EdTech field are plentiful and quite convincing. Financial decisions related to technology should be influenced solely by learning goals, not advertising and sales pressures. Students may see and use technology as a toy, just for fun, or because it is the latest fad. The challenge for teachers is to convince students instead to spend time using technology to grow their learning and critical thinking skills. Technology can be a huge time waster if it is not planned adequately and implemented properly in lessons.

Since we all now live in a very technological world, students are faced with a digital society that is complex and quickly changing and consequently the definitions and understandings of citizenship are also changing. Digital literacy and understanding how the tech industry affects people and communities are important topics to learn about. Technology in schools is unavoidable, and because of the rapidly changing nature of this field educators face difficult challenges in navigating these new digital classrooms. There are many potential benefits to embracing what technology has to offer and with plenty of time, consideration, and careful planning, districts, educators, and students can weave their way through education in this rapidly evolving digital era.

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Fostering a Culture of Change Through Leadership Practices

Amber Lawrence

Abstract

Schools often face pressure to adapt and meet the needs of an evolving world for student success. School cultures conducive to change are better equipped to meet the social and academic needs of their students. Often these changes are resisted by policies and even staff because change can be uncomfortable when met with a lack of support. School leaders must intentionally develop a culture of change through effective leadership practices, strategic hiring, and purposeful coaching and feedback systems. By establishing trust, co-constructing a vision, celebrating successes and learning from setbacks, and implementing effective support systems along the way, school leaders mitigate uncertainty and resistance while supporting teachers and stakeholders in recognizing the purpose and potential impact of each change.

Change is uncomfortable, and yet it is our only constant. Schools face insurmountable pressures to adapt when our outside world is exponentially evolving, and still the dominating school structure remains relatively unchanged. Multiple hurdles, including policies and external pressures can resist change, so school leaders and teachers have to spend time dismantling archaic systems before actually implementing the changes. Resistance by staff can also be a hurdle, as new changes sometimes ignore the actual situations a teacher faces in their classroom, including an ever-increasing work and mental load, inadequate financial support for resources, and insufficient dedicated time. Teacher resistance also increases by age and number of years teaching (Lomba-Portela et al., 2022). Implementing change within a school requires a visionary leader who acknowledges their influence and ability to change the culture in a school (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2024). By creating a vision for a culture of change through good leadership practices, hiring with a change culture in mind, and establishing a system of coaching and feedback within the team, school leaders can establish a culture that is willing to embrace change for the betterment of their students.

Cultivating Change Culture Through Good Leadership Practices

Change requires the directive of a leader who exudes the qualities necessary to influence the right actions in their team day-in and day-out, establish the vision, implement the necessary strategies, and celebrate the team. The leader in a school culture conducive to change is well-regulated, grounded, and able to tackle challenges with eloquence due to their unwavering values in a time of uncertainty. The leader can see how all parts are working together in the system, how they will come together to progress towards the goal, and how external or internal factors may lead to unintended consequences (Brown, 2025), reacting in a confident, consistent manner that develops trust within the team and overall organization (Covey & Merrill, 2006). For example, when the leader is entrenched in the inner workings of the school and maintains appropriate communication lines between all members of the team, the members converse easily with the leader on any progress towards or away from the goal. Consistent, small updates help the leader to stay the course, or pivot where necessary and then inform necessary team members of any changes or progress while assessing, navigating, and avoiding any possible negative or unintended consequences.

When establishing the vision, the leader needs to consider that the demands on educators' brains and the mental load we carry may be to the point of exhaustion. The leader must establish a vision that is easy to recall, and that takes away from this mental load instead of adding to it (Rock, 2023). Once the main vision is established, leaders must break it down into more manageable and actionable steps, aiming for a week-by-week playbook whereby staff are

clear on the directive as they are also asked to communicate and show their understanding (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

For example, the next step for staff to take can be introduced in a staff meeting, such as implementing more turn-and-talks for students in their daily practice. A checklist of routines can easily be made and distributed to staff, along with a checklist of the days ahead and how many times they wish to implement the practice every day. Teachers are encouraged to take two minutes at the end of each day to assess how they did according to the checklist, as well as whether they missed any steps, and any personal next steps they wish for themselves. Staff should be given release time to observe other teachers in their building who feel comfortable showing their implementation of the strategy, or who are also looking for feedback on what worked or what didn't. When teachers see the practicality and influence of their work, they are more emotionally and intrinsically motivated to continue the new behaviours to work towards the common goal (Heenan et al., 2023). Establishing a collaborative work environment between teachers not only has the greatest effect on student achievement, with a Hattie effect size of 1.57 (Waack, 2026, "Hattie Ranking" section, para. 4), but it also has a positive effect on the workplace culture with teachers (Lasrin et al., 2025). Follow-up at the next staff meeting can be small-group or whole-group discussion on what worked and what didn't, along with a celebration of staff willingness to rehearse the strategy.

Additionally, the leader within a culture of change celebrates wins and gives credit where credit is due. Giving a team the recognition they deserve by looking for actions that work towards positive change is a powerful motivating force. Teachers become even more invested in the vision when they receive specific praise and recognition (Lasrin et al., 2025). Setting a time and place for appropriate feedback and ensuring that incremental wins are properly communicated help the collective stay committed to the common goal (Knight, 2018). The appreciation and praise must be frequent and specific to show that each team member is instrumental in establishing this change for the betterment of the students (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

Hiring for the Vision

When looking for talent and personalities conducive to adding to a culture of change, a leader must have strategy in mind. Recruitment can happen any time there is a new connection if the organization has a consistent and unambiguous profile of the desired qualities for candidates (Tulgan, 2000). Potential employees will feel more secure if they see their own personal values in a school's expressed expectations and future visions. Recruiting messages should appeal to both the emotional and practical side of what the opportunity offers, playing into the human need to want to be a part of something with meaning that will have a lasting, positive effect on students. The overall process should be revised and reviewed regularly to accommodate change and anticipate future needs (Covey, 2006).

Hiring interviews should invite conversations that reveal whether the candidates want to be a part of a team that embraces change, or they prefer steady educational practices to dominate. One example question is, "Tell us about a time when you were asked to adopt a new approach in your teaching practice that you were skeptical of. How did you respond, and what was the outcome?" It is also helpful to understand generational shifts in candidates. The "Gen Z" that is dominantly entering the workforce is a generation that belongs to a constantly shifting world of technology, leading them to focus on short-term, practical actions that affect the here and now, as opposed to big-picture, slow moving goals such as mastery and memorization (Miller, 2024). Having staff who are willing to adapt quickly and take actionable feedback in the here-and-now can be exactly what a culture of change needs for students' benefit.

Establishing Coaching and Feedback Systems

Once the vision is established, proper supports are in place, and the team's actions to deliver results are clear, a continuing system of communicative coaching and feedback will ensure that the team knows what they are doing and are working efficiently to build connections between the classroom and the vision. When an instructional playbook specifically guides practice, acknowledges challenges that teachers may expect, and outlines the when and where of the actual coaching sessions, teacher buy-in increases emotionally and professionally (Knight, 2018). For example, if teachers want to improve literacy rates in their school with a student-centred goal, selecting a strategy to implement or improve from an instructional playbook can reduce ambiguity while endorsing teacher voice about which specific goal to work on. Tracking teacher action, and collecting initial and ongoing student data, are crucial to assess whether the chosen methods are working or not. The leader must give appropriate feedback, both positive and constructive, specific to each situation. A culture of change is best met when it is matched to a culture of continual improvement.

The leader also needs to acknowledge their own role in learning and improving as an instructional coach, treating others as those others want to be treated and not necessarily how they, themselves, would like to be treated (Heenan et al., 2023). Adapting their own coaching methods is imperative and may also require the leader to take the time to teach and to ask staff to provide feedback on the coaching and feedback system. It is respectful to ask staff if they, in fact, felt the process was beneficial, in what ways, and then if not, work towards ways together to make the coaching experience mutually beneficial to all parties involved. The ways a person delivers feedback may need to vary in accordance with the person receiving it. If a culture of change is truly to be sought within a school building, then the leader must also lead by example and be willing to change and adapt in their practices, as well.

Conclusion

Establishing a culture conducive to change is instrumental in meeting our students' educational needs. Leaders who establish trust in their team through good leadership practices, create a clear and actionable vision while maintaining good communication lines, hire with the vision of change culture in mind, and develop a system of coaching and feedback conducive to teacher collective efficacy are establishing a foundation where change can be embraced. Educators who feel appropriately supported and recognized for their efforts can become a powerful force, nurturing an educational experience that benefits students emotionally and academically.

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About the Author

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From Disconnection to Commitment: Leadership Engagement Through a Transformational Leadership Lens within a Manitoba Context

Madison Carter-Plouffe

Abstract

This article discusses ways the leadership disengagement crisis in Manitoba, Canada, can be addressed through the lens of transformational leadership behaviours. The overarching themes to addressing leadership disengagement are identifying feasible demands, nurturing the professional change required when moving roles, and developing mentorship in current school leaders. Transformational leadership behaviours address the concerns about the future of school leadership by outlining factors that attract aspiring leaders to pursue leadership roles.

I first saw the post on the front page of the divisional website – We are hiring! Multiple principal positions available! It was a call to the public for principal candidates for positions that had been posted internally with no success. This reminds me of conversations I hear frequently around my school division: the pool of future leaders is small because few people want to do the job. This statement, paired with the looming mass-retirement of current school leaders in the next few years, leaves a lot to be studied about “leadership disengagement,” a phenomenon that describes the withdrawal of interest in leadership roles (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). The solution lies in using a transformational leadership lens.

Current School Principalship

While some may question the decision to pursue educational leadership, I believe the leadership disengagement crisis is a problem that can be addressed by identifying feasible demands, nurturing the professional change required when moving roles, and developing mentorship in current school leaders.

Identifying Feasible Demands of a School Leader

The increasing demands of the job of school principal are causing a decreasing interest in the role (Barty et al., 2005; Galdames & Gonzalez, 2016). School principals are expected to be role-models, financial planners, counsellors, instructional leaders, maintain a desirable school climate, and engage multiple stakeholders, all while enduring high levels of stress and maintaining emotional regulation (Wicher, 2017). The increasing demands of the job are leading to reluctance in aspiring leaders applying for the role because they perceive little benefit to taking on more work (Pijanowski et al., 2009; Tamadoni et al., 2024; Walker & Kwan, 2009). The Manitoba Council of School Leaders (COSL) defines the role of principal and vice-principal as overseeing daily operations, communicating student achievement to families, acting within the policies of school board, school planning, financial management, ensuring student and staff safety, supervision and evaluation of teachers, and supporting school-based parent groups (The Manitoba Teachers Society, 2024). The demands of the job are highly dependent on the school division, size of the school, student population demographic, urban or rural setting, and community needs, which makes it difficult to create a one-size-fits-all approach to defining feasible leadership demands.

Additionally, assuming the role of principal is perceived as more work, more accountability, and increasing pressure from parents (Barty et al., 2005; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Walker & Kwan, 2009). Pijanowski et al. (2009) found that stress and time spent at work are two of the main factors for leadership disengagement, with over 90% of the principals surveyed identifying stress as a problem. Teachers who shift to administrator roles may anticipate feeling a bigger

impact on students' lives than they could in the classroom (Tekleselassie, 2024), but principals typically work with students only when they have available time or when there is a behaviour to address. Identifying achievable demands and priorities allows the principal to complete the most important tasks, in a reasonable timeframe, within the constraints of the workday. Unachievable demands may lead to school leaders feeling burnt out by a never-ending to-do list or needing to stay late at work and on weekends to meet their deadlines.

Nurturing the Change Required To Be a School Principal

The expectations of a school principal are unrealistic and unsustainable and, most importantly, they are straying further away from the aspects of the job that teachers enjoy. Typically, aspiring leaders come from a teacher role (or similar roles like student services) where they are intrinsically motivated by the work they do with students. As leadership roles shift more towards a managerial and operations focus, the principalship loses some appeal (Barty et al., 2005; Rintoul & Bishop, 2019).

Manitoba's School Leadership Framework outlines important expectations of the job while supporting professional growth and development, helping to nurture the change required when changing positions. The five leadership focus areas from the framework are continuous improvement, learning, the organization, an inclusive school community, and relationships (Government of Manitoba, 2024). Positions of power come with increasing demands. The Manitoba School Leadership Framework provides clarity on the dispositions and focus areas of the school leadership role, while still emphasizing the big picture.

The movement from teacher to principal requires a shift in professional identity. School leader development programs should emphasize leadership identity, values, and beliefs rather than solely the required skills and techniques (Crow & Møller, 2017). This transition requires a change in teachers' professional identity to fit the new requirements of the principalship. Reshaping their identity takes time as they develop their leadership confidence and style.

Emotional Development and Mentorship

Current school principals influence educators' decisions about whether to pursue leadership roles. If the current principal is viewed in a positive way, it may encourage others to pursue leadership roles that are perceived as desirable (Walker & Kwan, 2009). Conversely, principals who speak negatively about their role may weaken teachers' interest in pursuing leadership positions (Barty et al., 2005). Social capital describes relationships, trust, and social networks. Principals who have strong mental health and use well-being strategies are more likely to have high levels of social capital, which negatively correlates with stress, conflict, burnout, and emotional demands, and positively correlates with job satisfaction and autonomy (Wicher, 2017). To encourage aspiring leaders, principals need to communicate and demonstrate the fulfilling aspects of their job and show interest in leadership development of their staff (Galdames & Gonzalez, 2016).

Acting principals and vice-principals should be given professional training on emotional intelligence to develop their social skills and self-regulation. Aspiring school leaders may become vice-principals before taking on a principalship; however, the role of vice-principal may deter movement into the principal role rather than promote it. The vice-principal role is not clearly defined and usually depends on the requirements of the school and direction from the principal (Rintoul & Bishop, 2019; Rintoul & Kennelly, 2014). Vice-principals are often left with an unpredictable schedule, learning as they go in a role where they are highly visible. The resultant feelings of negativity and inadequacy about the job can deter them from continuing to pursue leadership opportunities. While the vice-principal and principal work together to lead a school, it is important to acknowledge that principals also provide a level of mentorship to vice-principals who typically would have less experience than the principal.

Summary

The role of school leader is important, and it takes change, risk-taking, and the desire for growth to transition into the role. To attract aspiring leaders to applying for the role, the demands of the job must be feasible to avoid feeling stressed, burnt out, and reluctant to take on more work. The shift from teacher to principal requires a change in professional identity that needs to be nurtured to develop new values and vision to connect with the new role. The professional development aspect should also extend to current principals whose attitude towards their job and mentorship ability can impact aspiring leaders' view of the role.

Transformational Leadership

The transformational leadership style is motivational, inspiring, and instills confidence and capacity (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). As opposed to transactional leadership which is incentive-based, transformational leadership (TL) prioritizes intrinsic motivation to improve, building up a person's ability to perform (capacity) and to take on new responsibilities. Because TL is goal-oriented, transactional leaders develop leadership in their followers by providing inspiration and empowerment, as well as helping them work to the overall vision of the organization – which in turn contributes to organizational improvements (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Leadership Behaviours

Bass and Avolio (2004) created a Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) that describes the following transformational leadership behaviours: building trust, acting with integrity, encouraging others, encouraging innovative thinking, and coaching and developing others. Idealized influence depicts the transformational leader as an inspirational role model who gives aspiring leaders someone to look to for guidance, support, and determination. Inspirational motivation describes the enthusiasm in which the transformational leader provides intrinsic motivation to the aspiring leaders role. Intellectual stimulation describes a person who leads learning and questioning, encourages risk-taking, and learning from mistakes. Lastly, individualized consideration views the transformational leader as a mentor, meeting the individual needs of each team member, thus broadening their potential (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Each of these behaviours describes ways the transformational leader impacts their team, creating change, and improving organizational outcomes.

Figure 1 describes the change from leadership disengagement to engagement through transformational leadership while considering the leadership focus areas from the Manitoba School Leadership Framework (Government of Manitoba, 2024). The framework was created based on the programs and cultural groups found in Manitoba, Canada, and therefore provides context to the problem of practice.

Figure 1

Leadership Engagement through Transformational Leadership Behaviours in Manitoba



(original figure by Madison Carter-Plouffe, 2025)

High-quality leadership is important to organizational reform and improved outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2006). Leadership disengagement is an organizational issue. School principals are the middle person between senior administration (e.g., superintendents) and teachers; therefore, the lack of interest in principalship impacts all levels. In Figure 1, the funnel starts with leadership disengagement. Through the application of TL behaviours by Bass and Avolio (2004) and the leadership focus areas from the Manitoba School Leadership Framework (Government of Manitoba, 2024), there is a transformation to leadership engagement. The process of moving from disengagement to engagement starts at the top of the funnel where the opening is large, representing vast expectations and demands, towards the bottom of the funnel where the opening is small, representing purpose, clarity, and certainty.

Leadership Engagement

TL uses intrinsic motivation for improvement. Tekleselassie (2024) outlined intrinsic factors that attract aspiring leaders to pursue leadership roles. First, school leadership roles offer more opportunity to influence children's lives. More decision-making power means more ability to impact lives and make positive changes. A strong commitment to leadership originates from former leaders who were positive influences for the job. When transformational leaders use idealized influence and individualized consideration, they simultaneously make the role of school leader attractive, mentoring aspiring leaders, and developing leadership potential in their team. Leaders are expected to use effective interpersonal skills by establishing trust and

respectful communication, establishing a strong school culture, creating a supporting and caring environment, and modelling self-care (Government of Manitoba, 2024).

When transformational leaders use inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation, they build the capacity of aspiring leaders to take on more responsibility which helps aspiring leaders prepare for the increasing demands of the job (Galdames & Gonzalez, 2016). The Manitoba School Leadership Framework encourages leaders to build the capacity of staff by creating learning opportunities and developing a collaborative and mentor-focused culture (Government of Manitoba, 2024). Lastly, TL impacts the whole system, creating learning environments that are effective and well-run, which may help reduce the amount of stress and pressure that is perceived to come with the role of principal (Wicher, 2017).

Summary

Transformational leadership, as opposed to transactional leadership, uses intrinsic motivation and inspiration to instill confidence and capacity in their team (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Figure 1 describes the change from leadership disengagement to engagement through a TL lens while considering the leadership focus areas from the Manitoba School Leadership Framework (Government of Manitoba, 2024). The TL lens includes the MLQ created by Bass and Avolio (2004) describing transformational leader behaviours and its impact on leadership disengagement. TL is a high-quality leadership style that supports organizational change (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000, 2006). Effective school leaders must have the capacity to perform strong leadership behaviours.

Conclusion

While some may question the decision to pursue educational leadership, I believe the leadership disengagement crisis is a problem that can be addressed by identifying feasible demands, nurturing the professional change required when switching roles, and developing mentorship in current school leaders. Possible solutions include defining the vice-principal role, using transformational leadership to engage and inspire aspiring leaders, focusing on the intrinsic motivators of leadership, and ensuring proper mental health supports for school leaders. With the looming mass retirement of the baby boomer generation in current leadership roles, there is concern about the future of school leadership. As an aspiring leader and a teacher pursuing a master's degree in educational administration, examining this situation is important to my future career aspirations and the opportunity to further explore the factors for declining interest and effective, evidence-based ways that school divisions are attracting and preparing future school leaders.

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The Impact of Teachers' Mental Health and Well-Being on Student Achievement: A Pyramid Model for Educational Wellness in Canadian Schools

Odette Megalaa

Abstract

Research shows that teacher mental health is the primary factor in determining educational standards and student academic success. Teachers who maintain good emotional health deliver better instruction and build stronger classroom bonds, leading to better student outcomes. The Canadian education system faces two significant challenges: teachers now face increased work responsibilities and emotional pressure from supporting students who need more help after the pandemic disrupted learning. The Pyramid of Educational Well-Being presents a three-level structure that starts with schools as the base, followed by teachers as the central element, and ends with students as the final recipients. The Pyramid enables schools to become complete wellness systems through their combination of leadership development, teacher emotional health support, and student resilience-building programs. Canadian K–8 schools that strengthen their Pyramid model implementation through better policies, safer classrooms, improved mental health services, and teacher training programs will achieve greater student resilience and academic outcomes. Educational leaders can use this model to create permanent wellness-focused school communities that support academic achievement and complete student growth for every member.

Educational quality and student achievement rely on teachers' mental health and overall health. Teachers' emotional stability directly affects student learning outcomes, including their ability to stay focused in class and achieve academic success. Teachers who experience mental distress create adverse effects on their classroom relationships, teaching quality, and school environment. Today's Canadian teachers must handle both rising workloads and additional curriculum demands. Further, students need help recovering from pandemic-related challenges. Teachers' deteriorating mental health is linked to declining student achievement.

Reupert's (2019) proposed solution, the Pyramid, is a structured approach that positions schools as the foundation, teachers as the central element, and students at the top (see Figure 1). This model is designed to enable organizations to build lasting solutions through three stages: institutional leadership development, teacher emotional health support, and student resilience development.

The Problem and Its Educational Significance

Teachers function as both instructional authorities and role models, using their mental state to direct classroom activities. Teachers who experience higher levels of well-being are better able to establish positive relationships with students, manage classroom challenges effectively, and create supportive learning environments that promote student engagement and achievement (Granziera et al., 2023). Student academic results and social-emotional growth suffer when teachers experience ongoing stress and emotional exhaustion; their classrooms become less supportive (Harding et al., 2019). Canadian school data show that teacher distress directly affects student mental health outcomes (De Rubeis et al., 2024). Students of teachers who show high psychological strain develop more anxiety symptoms and lower self-efficacy levels. Teachers who maintain high self-efficacy and professional satisfaction create better learning environments, which in turn lead to enhanced student involvement and academic outcomes (Granziera et al., 2023). Accordingly, teaching excellence depends on teachers' psychological states.

Teachers' distress factors include personal emotional exhaustion and organizational factors that shape their work environment. Emotional labor, limited autonomy, excessive workload and time pressures, and difficulties maintaining a healthy work-life balance further increase the risk of psychological distress and reduced well-being (Zhou et al., 2024). Organizational factors, including inadequate administrative support, poor school climate, and role ambiguity, further contribute to teacher distress (Nwoko et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers with lower levels of self-efficacy are more likely to experience stress and burnout (Mijakoski et al., 2022). Overall, teacher distress appears to result from a combination of workload demands, classroom challenges, organizational conditions, and individual factors.

Teachers experience burnout due to heavy workloads, insufficient administrative support, and restricted professional freedom, which negatively affects their teaching abilities (Agyapong et al., 2024). Student misbehaviour and classroom management challenges are also strongly associated with teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion (Aloe et al., 2014). The same finding was supported by an international study that demonstrated that teachers' cognitive state directly affects student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2019). Thus, teachers' performance improvement requires organizations to focus on both psychological factors and work environment conditions.

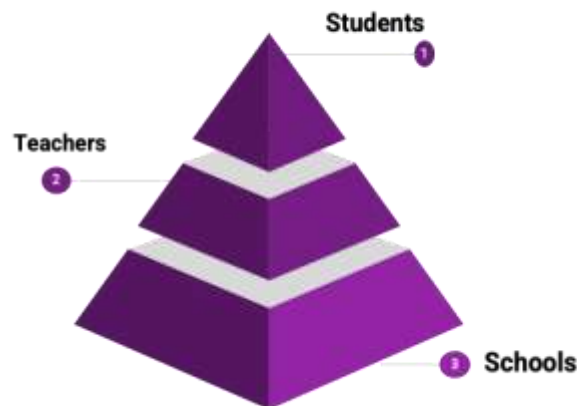
The post-pandemic period in Canada has created new challenges for educators. Canadian educators experience ongoing exhaustion and emotional fatigue because they view their workloads as unmanageable while facing rising student demands (CTF-FCE, 2024). The CTF-FCE organization calls for fundamental changes to the system. It emphasizes that leaders must actively support teacher wellness because teachers' emotional strain leads to two significant effects: employee departures and deterioration in student performance. The protection of teacher mental health is a fundamental requirement for preserving educational stability and a positive school atmosphere. Teacher-student identity matching through shared values and respectful relationships directly affects student motivation and self-assurance (Eble & Hu, 2020). Teachers who experience psychological distress lose their ability to establish meaningful connections with students, and this can affect the overall climate of their educational institution.

The Proposed Solution

The solution requires a dual approach that addresses both organizational frameworks and individual human needs. The proposed solution uses a pyramid structure that starts with institutional foundations, establishes teachers as essential elements, and ends with student achievement growth (see Figure 1, The Proposed Pyramid Model Solution).

Figure 1

The Proposed Pyramid Model Solution



(figure by Odette Megalaa based on ideas from Reupert, 2019)

Base of the Pyramid: School-Level Foundations

Schools serve as the organizational foundation that supports both teacher wellness and student achievement success in the Pyramid of Educational Well-Being. That base functions as an ecosystem that either creates positive or negative effects on teachers' mental health through a trauma-informed environment (Reupert, 2019). It consists of organizational and administrative elements that determine teacher work through leadership and workload balance. Improving teachers' mental health requires institutions to develop wellness-focused policies and leadership teams. Schools should integrate mental health support into their core values and operational guidelines rather than treating it as an additional service (Reupert, 2019). Schools that implement whole-school mental health programs, whereby staff members work together to build mental health knowledge, will improve teachers' coping skills and student participation rates. The CTF-FC (2024) supported schools to integrate educator wellness into their strategic plans, so psychological safety becomes an essential priority instead of an additional benefit. School leaders who demonstrate emotional intelligence and create spaces for stress discussions and help-seeking practices establish a supportive environment for their staff.

School leaders determine the psychological environment of their institutions through their leadership actions. Principals who demonstrate emotional intelligence and foster supportive environments help teachers build resilience through greater autonomy, more effective feedback, and stronger relationships with colleagues (Bagdziūnienė et al., 2022). Teachers who receive compassion from their workplaces report higher life satisfaction, suggesting that education needs leaders who practise compassion-based leadership (Buonomo, 2022). Teachers who feel supported by administrators experience the highest job satisfaction, which directly affects their decision to continue teaching (Tickle, 2011). School principals play an essential role in retaining teachers, especially when they must navigate demanding situations in schools with challenging conditions (Lochmiller et al., 2024). Thus, teachers remain committed to their profession when administrators understand their work stress and practise empathetic leadership while maintaining a proper balance between performance targets and teacher welfare.

Teacher performance and student outcomes are directly related to the emotional and cognitive support teachers receive from their educational institutions (Hanushek et al., 2019). Schools that support teacher development through mentorship programs and collaborative learning spaces enable their staff to develop essential psychological skills to maintain high performance. Thus, teachers' mental health stands as both an ethical requirement and an organizational necessity. The CTF-FCE (2024) supports provincial and district leaders in developing specific policies focused on teacher well-being. The organization supports three main recommendations: reducing administrative work, establishing counselling services, and creating a trauma-informed climate. Schools that implement these measures will create a stable environment that enables teachers to dedicate their time to teaching rather than to their own survival needs.

The base of the Pyramid represents more than organizational structure because it embodies the moral principles that educational leaders should follow. A well-functioning school environment requires deliberate planning to develop. Academic institutions need to establish wellness programs that support their staff while maintaining performance standards and encouraging teamwork between colleagues. Schools that build such environments create conditions that enable teachers to develop resilience and students to achieve success.

Middle of the Pyramid: Teacher-Level Well-Being

Teachers are the fundamental element of the Pyramid because they connect school structures to student achievement. The system's base provides support, but teachers' psychological health, emotional resilience, and professional identity determine their ability to teach effectively and support student growth (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day & Gu, 2010). The state

of teacher well-being serves as a connecting factor that either strengthens or weakens the impact of institutional policies on students' learning achievements. Teachers need support in managing their stress and burnout. Teachers who have experienced high distress levels fail to create positive classroom environments, which causes students to develop anxiety and become disconnected from their learning (De Rubeis et al., 2024). Teachers who have experienced emotional exhaustion display lower student well-being, reduced academic motivation, and increased behavioural problems (Harding et al., 2019). Teachers who have completed advanced education programs develop enhanced skills to support students emotionally and to create supportive learning environments, leading to improved student mental health and cognitive outcomes (Qin et al., 2025).

Teachers' well-being should be the primary focus of professional development programs that help them build resilience. Teachers who have received multilevel interventions, including mentoring, coaching, and mindfulness training, develop greater self-efficacy and job satisfaction, leading to improved student outcomes (Granziera et al., 2023). Teachers in K-8 settings need these interventions because they address the emotional, social, and cognitive needs of students with diverse needs. Schools that offer opportunities for reflection, skill development, and peer support enable teachers to maintain high teaching standards while protecting themselves from ongoing stress.

The connection between teachers and their students depends on how well teachers' professional practices align with students' needs. Students achieve their best results when teachers maintain emotional states that align with their students' needs (Eble & Hu, 2020). Teachers who experience emotional distress may develop relationship problems with their students, which result in students becoming less engaged and less motivated, while their academic performance suffers. Teachers who develop emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and stress-management skills will maintain strong relationships with students while demonstrating healthy coping strategies. Educational organizations need to establish these practices because individual efforts alone cannot build resilience, which requires both organizational backing and cultural endorsement (Moss, 2021). Implementing peer support networks, mentorship programs, and mental health services at this level provides teachers with essential support. Teachers who establish professional boundaries, practise self-care, and work together with colleagues will achieve a better work-life balance.

The middle section of the Pyramid serves as the educational well-being power source, transforming institutional support into actual classroom achievements. Teachers who maintain emotional stability and professional competence, and who build strong student relationships, function as successful connectors between administrative decisions and better student results. The Pyramid depends on the foundational layer of teacher well-being to operate successfully because it enables school policies to produce meaningful learning benefits for students.

Top of the Pyramid: Student-Level Outcomes

The highest point of the Pyramid of Educational Well-Being shows students who receive benefits from systemic backing and teacher wellness initiatives. By fostering healthy and supported educators, schools create conditions that enhance teaching effectiveness and learning experiences, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes. Students achieve better academic results, show improved social-emotional skills, and participate more in learning when teachers receive emotional and professional support from their schools. Teacher mental health directly affects student well-being because students of teachers who experience high stress and burnout levels show increased anxiety, lower self-confidence, and reduced learning motivation (Harding et al., 2019). Students perform better and show better emotional control when their teachers receive support and demonstrate resilience in their classroom leadership (De Rubeis et al., 2024). Teachers serve as essential connectors between school policies and student success because their psychological empowerment directly benefits students.

Teacher well-being positively affects students' social-emotional growth and academic achievement. Students learn best when their teachers share similar beliefs and emotional states, because this leads to better learning outcomes (Eble & Hu, 2020). Teachers who demonstrate emotional control, empathy, and resilience help their students develop these skills, creating better classroom environments and fewer behavioural issues. The alignment between teachers and students has the most significant impact during K-8 education, as students develop their basic social and cognitive abilities. Students' academic results improve through school-based interventions, which positively affect student learning. Teacher participation in mentoring, professional development, and well-being programs leads to better student outcomes through higher test scores, greater participation, and fewer absences (Granziera et al., 2023). The Pyramid system presents how school-level and teacher-level interventions create a chain reaction that leads to measurable student achievements. The process of professional reflection, with built-in measurement tools, helps schools create flexible interventions that match students' needs.

The top section of the Pyramid shows that student achievement depends entirely on teachers' health and the support systems within their schools. Students who benefit from teachers' support and school stability achieve better academic results and develop stronger emotional skills and better learning resilience. The process of monitoring student results helps schools assess how well their well-being programs affect student success.

Implementation and Evaluation Strategies

The Pyramid model needs to be implemented in Canadian K-8 schools through a planned system that addresses institutional requirements, teacher support, and student needs simultaneously. The system requires all educational components to work together to improve student outcomes and promote student health.

First, schools need to establish mental health and wellness policies that prioritize the welfare of teachers and students. The implementation of mental health literacy during professional development, access to counselling services, peer support, and reduced administrative work to stop teacher burnout should be part of the system (Larson & Laurie, 2020; Reupert, 2019). Schools that use distributed leadership approaches, whereby teachers help make decisions and work together on plans, achieve better staff morale and reduced employee departure rates (Hanushek et al., 2019). Accordingly, leaders who want to foster psychological safety in their organizations should promote stress discussions and show empathy through their leadership approach.

Second, the middle Pyramid layer requires systematic programs that help teachers build emotional strength and professional confidence and develop better coping skills. Research indicates that mentoring programs, peer coaching, mindfulness training, and stress management workshops enhance teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (De Rubeis et al., 2024; Granziera et al., 2023). Teacher autonomy, combined with recognition for professional achievement, helps teachers maintain their sense of purpose, which helps fight burnout and supports their continued engagement (Eble & Hu, 2020).

Third, the highest point of the Pyramid requires schools to track student results, because this helps them assess how well their system-wide and teacher-based interventions work. Schools need to create peer-support networks and reflective practice groups that help teachers work together to solve problems. Implementing social-emotional learning curricula with classroom strategies that foster emotional control and resilience helps teachers apply their own well-being progress to student behavioural changes.

Fourth, the Pyramid model derives its strength from its connected structure, because systemic support helps teachers build resilience, which in turn leads to better student outcomes. All levels need to work together through coordinated implementation strategies that link policy decisions to professional development programs and student-focused initiatives. The

combination of administrative policies that reduce teacher workload stress, teacher coaching programs, and classroom-based social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives will yield student benefits by improving teacher well-being. The Pyramid model operates as an integrated system because its holistic approach enables interventions to work together to support one another.

The Pyramid model requires purposeful planning, research-based strategies, and ongoing assessment to ensure successful implementation. Canadian K-8 schools that focus on simultaneous support for schools, teachers, and students will foster enduring well-being, achieve better academic results, and create a strong learning environment that supports educational and social-emotional development.

Conclusion

Teachers' health directly affects student success, classroom environment, and school operations. Educational institutions that focus on systemic support and deliver strong teacher-centered interventions and student outcome monitoring create an environment that enables all educational members to succeed. The Pyramid of Educational Well-Being provides educators with a valuable framework for addressing this complex matter. The model shows how schools form the base, teachers stand at the center, and students occupy the highest position, demonstrating their interconnectedness. The base of the Pyramid represents school policies that provide the support teachers need to maintain their professional and emotional stability. The model requires schools to work together at all implementation stages. Administrators need to foster psychological safety in their schools, make mental health services accessible, and reduce organizational pressures. Teachers need to develop their skills through professional training, peer assistance, student relationship development, and self-reflection activities, which enhance their ability to cope with stress and build stronger bonds with their students. Students need to participate in evaluation activities that use performance data and socio-emotional metrics to validate the intervention's effectiveness and adaptiveness. These strategies establish a lasting wellness system for the entire school community.

Educational leaders must treat teacher mental health as their primary responsibility rather than an optional initiative. Canadian K-8 schools that use the Pyramid framework will establish an environment in which institutional support for teacher wellness leads to better student outcomes. These schools will become dual-purpose institutions that teach students while fostering environments that promote care, resilience, and the full development of students.

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Egyptian-born Odette Megalaa began her journey as a music teacher before earning two post-baccalaureate credentials in counselling and special education. Today, she serves as a caring school counsellor while pursuing an M.Ed. in educational leadership, actively invests in her community through nonprofit organizations, and cherishes her roles as a devoted wife and mother of two.

Prioritizing Career Development for High School Students

Gavin Taylor

Abstract

Career development shapes the future of high school students. These students must view themselves as competent and possessing the potential necessary to achieve valued vocational opportunities. Educators and parents need to be better prepared to support the growth of high school students, and to assist in navigating complex obstacles that arise. Additionally, educators must provide authentic experiences for all students to establish a foundation to build their desired livelihood.

Career development is critical in determining the work and life trajectories of youth. However, high school students experience career development challenges with stress and self-efficacy; support systems including parents, educators, and peers; and the demands of industry. Educators, teachers, and experts are essential in supporting the growth of high school students and their career development.

Student Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy and stress play significant roles in career decisions among high school students. Youth begin thinking about careers as early as middle school, when they begin shaping opinions of themselves and how they may fit into certain opportunities (Heymann et al., 2022). As students age, self-efficacy is important for building the confidence necessary to make important decisions that will impact their futures (Zeng & Ma, 2025). Students who lack self-efficacy can experience anxiety in making critical decisions, adding to the physical, emotional, and academic stressors high schoolers commonly face (Samson et al., 2024). Self-efficacy development begins at a young age and helps them make informed decisions during stressful transitions in their lives.

Because the process of career development starts at an early age (Jiang et al., 2021), young students need to explore and relate their own interests to the opportunities present in their world. Learning about careers and building competencies (Zhou et al., 2024) motivates students to form positive attitudes about school and development. The increased motivation translates to careers, but also to academics. Constructing self-efficacy is essential to the career development of high school students.

Career development courses are beneficial to building self-efficacy among high school students (Zhou et al., 2024). These courses should focus on student experiences and provide opportunities for reflection (Gülşen et al., 2021) on career issues and methods to overcome barriers as they make career choices. Career development courses can be a scheduled class in a student's timetable (Portage Collegiate Institute) or a series of sessions in specialized programs (Hulukati et al., 2025). They should include discussions, assignments, lectures from experts, and personalized or small-group career decision-making sessions with career counselors (Gülşen et al., 2021). The learning processes should encourage students to think about the experiences that have shaped their perspectives and attitudes, while considering their alignment for potential career opportunities. Reflective practices to build self-efficacy can include summarizing their favourite story to think about challenges and long-term growth, and creating their own stories about which paths the students want to pursue in life (Gülşen et al., 2021). Emerging technologies such as virtual reality and 360-degree videos can provide authentic and immersive learning experiences for students to visualize the realities of various careers (Jiang et al., 2021, p. 883). The students develop stronger opinions about their interests and see themselves as more capable of achieving their career and life goals (Gülşen et al.,

2021). They are also better equipped to navigate career challenges and overcome obstacles in other areas of life due to increased self-efficacy.

Support From Parents, Educators, and Peers

Career decisions by high school students are typically influenced by their parents, educators, and peers. Culture and social traditions impact the significance of parental influence, but parental input is still important for most students (Samson et al., 2024). Parents set goals for their children, but as high school students age they are more likely to seek career-related information from teachers instead of parents. Teachers can significantly influence the views students have on certain careers and disciplines through the topics they teach, the in-class engagement and quality of education, the opportunities for authentic learning experiences within disciplines, and the time spent with students (Samson et al., 2024). The largest impact teachers can have on the career development of students comes beyond the curriculum document outcomes. Parents and educators have significant impacts on the career development and decision making of high school students, but they may not be fully aware of the influence they have during critical decisions youth make.

The surrounding environment of high school students can have significant impacts on their futures. Parents and communities must work together to create positive, nurturing environments for students to learn and explore different career opportunities (Zhou et al., 2024). Parents, educators, and peers can be viewed as role models by students (Gülşen et al., 2021). Role models can assist students to reflect on their own characteristics and develop rationale for their own decision-making. An activity students could perform is reflecting on personal sayings or phrases used often in their households or social circles (Gülşen et al., 2021). As students begin thinking about their environments and phrases that influence them, they should begin to see how they can adapt their career goals to form a cohesive plan for their future.

Educators and other school personnel need to be aware of the impact their teachings and conversations can have on students. School guidance counsellors are versed in supporting and navigating career challenges with students (Bersan et al., 2024). However, high school guidance counsellors often have extensive caseloads, and they may not be able to provide adequate support to students. Teachers also need to be trained in providing career support. Although vocational teachers are experts in their fields and have extensive knowledge of careers in specific industries, they may also need extra training to provide broader career counselling (Gülşen et al., 2021), including counselling skills to support the students' emotion (Zhou et al., 2025).

All teachers should become knowledgeable about providing individualized support for students (Zhou et al., 2025), including authentic learning experiences and aligning course objectives with the students' interests and future goals in mind. As well, educators can support career development by creating workshops for parents to understand their own influence and assist their children with complex decisions. Teachers should also strive to create mentoring opportunities for students among their peers, to provide different perspectives and holistic support for high school students. Parents, educators, and peers have significant influence in the successful career development of high school students, and they need to be adequately trained and prepared to assist with career-related learning.

Preparation for a Dynamic Economy

The world of work and relationships among workers have become increasingly complex (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). Workplaces and the economy are dynamic and intricate concepts for young people to consider when determining their vocational futures. Young people tend to work in industries that are impacted most by economic depressions, such as retail and hospitality (Tobin, 2024). Missing extended periods of work can

negatively impact their career earnings and opportunities for career advancement (Tobin, 2024). These occupational obstacles can also lead to personal challenges such as poor mental health and deteriorating social relationships. Additionally, job markets are changing quickly with the introduction of recent technologies (Zeng & Ma, 2025). For youth with post-secondary specializations and education, underemployment is a common barrier (Council of Ministers of Education, 2017). Income is a key factor in career development decisions for most youth (Heymann, 2022). A pitfall is an imbalance of focus between education and career, when they are more focussed on education than the prospect of careers after education in a particular field. Young Canadians have less attachment to workplaces than previous generations (Tobin, 2024). Indigenous youth and youth of other diverse backgrounds can face discrimination, which impedes their ability to experience, grow, and advance within an industry. Thus, aspects of career development are outside of high school students' control, which can negatively impact their career development and discourage them from the workplace and participating in the economy.

Educators need to be responsive to the rapidly changing world of industry to provide adequate career development for high school students. A generic career development program does not work for every student (Zhou et al., 2024). Career development is not only a study of workplaces and skills, but also an all-encompassing ideal of crafting lifestyles and goals. Educators must work to infuse topics of career development into learning for students across curricula, and not just reserve these topics for stand-alone career development courses. Students need to solve a variety of problems and actively learn to prepare for life after high school. For example, interactive career fairs can provide exposure and opportunities for exploration (Discovery Education, 2025). Students have opportunities to ask experts questions and to try activities that people in specific careers perform daily. Providing these experiences can help bridge the gaps between traditional education and careers. The current labour market requires employees to be adaptable and flexible, and high school students need to be able to transition into these roles (Hulukati et al., 2025). Discovering employment opportunities through rich opportunities is important for students to make informed decisions about their futures.

Conclusion

Career development is important for high school students. Young people face difficult challenges and decisions that can impact their lives. Educators hope to build systems to improve students' transitional process from school to employment (Council of Ministers of Education, 2017), but making career decisions can cause stress and low levels of self-efficacy when the proper supports are inadequate. Parents and educators play vital roles in the viewpoints and motivations of youth. Economic conditions also have implications in career development, especially as students attempt to progress through the ranks. Educators, parents, and career experts all play essential roles by building self-efficacy, considering the impact their words have on students, and providing information to explore with the future of the workforce.

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Promoting Adult-Student Equity Through Instructional Leadership

Alyssa Spacek

Abstract

This article considers students as co-constructors of the learning environment, highlighting the impact of learner representation on motivation, engagement, ownership, and academic success. It explores strategies such as student forums and advisory groups, flipped classrooms, and youth participatory action research to integrate student perspectives into school decision-making. When administrators intentionally incorporate student voice and share leadership responsibilities, schools can build a more equitable and dynamic culture of learning.

Effective instructional leadership “is not about the leader at all”; rather, it depends on how the leader works with all educational stakeholders to prioritize student learning (DeWitt, 2020, p. 6). Instructional leaders need to consider, involve, and utilize all their schools’ partners to flourish a culture of inclusive and meaningful learning. The significance of student voice in instructional leadership is often undervalued despite learner representation being key to their motivation, engagement, ownership, and success (Lewis, 2021). Instructional leaders need to see students as “co-constructors of the learning environment” (Joselowsky & Aseltine, 2011, p. 1). With a defined understanding of instructional leadership that includes the perspectives of students, administrators will be advantaged to treat students as key participants, incorporate their voices, and distribute leadership by capitalizing on shared adult-student decision-making. Current promising learner-driven practices include forums and student advisory groups, flipped classrooms, and youth participatory action research. Embedding student voice and participation in instructional leadership practices can pave the way for transformative learning experiences.

Defining Instructional Leadership

A definition and shared understanding of instructional leadership are required to effectively influence teaching and learning. Amid the interest and support for instructional leadership, an operational definition of the model continues to be interpreted in various ways, as there “remains much muddled thinking about what constitutes instructional leadership” and how it is differentiated from leadership broadly (Gupton, 2003, p. 32). At its core, instructional leadership involves leaders who prioritize implementing initiatives aimed at improving student achievement: a learning-centered approach, learner participation, pedagogical approaches, efficacy, and gathering data to evaluate impact (DeWitt, 2020). Strong instructional leaders collaborate on implementation with all stakeholders, especially students, “not as tokens so that the adults can say students have a voice” but through genuine opportunities for students to provide input (DeWitt, 2020, pp. 6, 11). To support promising practices, instructional leaders need to be student-centered and engaging with student voice in meaningful ways.

Student Involvement

Instructional leaders need to genuinely empower youth voice by reconsidering student involvement. Instructional leaders need to expand and prioritize the content of student input, because frequently they are “limited to topics like discipline policies, grading procedures, or cafeteria food” with no follow-up after their contributions (Lewis, 2021, “Levels,” para. 1). Students need opportunities “to participate in broader discussions about their world,” and their feedback needs to be reflected in school improvements and learning pathways (Lewis, 2021, “Levels,” para. 1). When considering an opportunity to include student voice in leadership decisions, administrators can benefit from using Fletcher’s (2017) Ladder of Student

Involvement, which connects each tier of the ladder to the approach students take to provide information and the degree to which their input is implemented in the school setting (Lewis, 2021). Instructional leaders should aim for the higher levels of interactions where learners, teachers, and leaders “actively co-create meaningful change” and embrace student-driven strategies and outcomes (Lewis, 2021, “Levels,” para. 3). The higher levels highlight the goal of equitable student-adult interactions. Learning will progress when instructional leaders ensure that their strategies also encompass collective voice and shared responsibility.

Forums and Advisory Groups

Students can ignite powerful discussions and share insightful reflections about their learning and the school environment. Student forums and advisory groups are impactful practices to organize, support, and connect with student voice. Student forums are open-access gatherings of students and leadership that are more informal and invite meaningful dialogue, whereas student advisory groups provide administrators with pre-determined groups of learners participating in focused discussions. Forums and advisory groups facilitate well-balanced and supportive learning environments (DeWitt, 2020). They introduce settings for youth to engage in open dialogue regarding academics and school climate (Lewis, 2021). Instructional leaders should use these connection opportunities to “listen for the purpose of understanding” (Lewis, 2021). Discussions with students can include academic programming, assessment, teaching strategies, the learning environment, metacognition, inclusive curriculum, social-emotional learning, and technology. Student forums and advisory groups can also be used as part of the implementation cycle or to celebrate evidence of successes sparked by student participation in the learning decision-making process.

Flipped Classroom Learning Model

Instructional leaders can also benefit from the contemporary flipped classroom learning model whereby prior in-class preliminary instruction is instead accomplished at home through videos, chats, studying, research, and learning activities, which gives class time for application and extension activities (Utami et al., 2024). In flipped classrooms, learners complete preparatory work to build beginning comprehension and class time focuses on knowledge sharing and critical thinking in a supportive community of learners. Students are asked “to report back on learning material or topics” so that enriched learning is achieved (Utami et al., 2024, p. 245). The primary goal of the flipped classroom model is to facilitate learning “oriented toward understanding and high-level skills of Bloom’s taxonomy” by encouraging learners to embrace a dynamic and competent role (Utami et al., 2024, p. 244). Flipped classrooms provide a flexible learning environment that values student-directed learning and pace (Utami et al., 2024). They positively impact student motivation, involvement, learning outcomes, digital citizenship, and integrity. Instructional leaders should promote the strategy with their classroom teachers to authentically incorporate student voice and direction into the curriculum, while building collaborative learning communities that also enhance staff’s instructional strategies.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth participatory action research is another way for instructional leaders to shift towards adult and student equity in pedagogical decision-making. The students actively participate by determining issues relevant to them, designing research projects around the issues, collecting and analyzing data, and using their results to recommend change in their school. Therefore, youth participatory action research inspires students as “active participants with agency” and “*citizens of the now*” who engage in their school community to critique, examine, recommend, and champion changes (Lewis, 2021, “Levels,” para. 3; Rubin, 2025, p. 45). The students reflect

on their academics and learning by inquiring , undertaking research, and drawing conclusions to “shed light on institutional and environmental issues” within their school (Lewis, 2021, “Levels,” para. 5). Students gain insight into deliberation and efficacy and witness their own ability to initiate the “change needed to transform their realities” (Howell, 2023, p. 1819). Youth participatory action research thus “leverages youth voice and perspective” (Gray & Ren, 2024, p. 4). Instructional leaders can involve themselves in the workflow, fund projects, employ the findings to improve the school community, and celebrate student advances.

Conclusion

A proficient instructional leader understands that the voices of all stakeholders need to be considered when authentically improving student learning. Therefore, student voice needs to be incorporated into instructional leadership discussions, decision-making, road mapping, and evaluating. Students are more engaged, driven, and accomplished when adult-student equity is present in the school's learning culture. Co-constructing the educational environment maximizes learning. Administrators can amplify student perspectives and foster shared responsibility by offering access to student forums and advisory groups, flipped classrooms, and youth participatory action research. Student-centred strategies that authentically include student voice and engagement will pave the way for stronger instructional leadership.

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Student Belonging Leads to Flourishing

Shannon Ploegman Smith

Abstract

Student belonging is a foundational factor influencing well-being, engagement, and academic success in secondary schools. Belonging is a multidimensional construct shaped by relational, structural, and cultural practices within school communities. The consequences of diminished belonging include emotional distress and disengagement. Prioritizing instructional strategies and academic success without relational grounding, mental wellness, and cultural responsiveness limits student flourishing. A system-wide approach can address this gap by embedding belonging across classrooms, school structures, and cultural norms. Key strategies include strong teacher-student relationships, clear expectations, student voice, supportive structures, restorative discipline, and culturally responsive practices.

A lack of belonging is an increasingly significant issue in high schools today. As educational research and school improvement priorities evolve, the concept of belonging or sense of connection has emerged as a central concern. With student well-being now understood to be directly linked to academic performance, attendance, engagement, and mental health, a growing body of evidence highlights that belonging is not a peripheral issue but a central determinant of positive student outcomes (Riley, 2022). However, many schools continue to fall short by focusing predominantly on instructional strategies and academic achievement while neglecting relational grounding, psychological needs, behaviour, and the structural and cultural practices that shape school life (Swaner & Wolfe, 2021). An intentional, system wide emphasis on relationship building, supportive structures, and cultural responsiveness is essential for making belonging a core priority rather than simply a consideration.

The Crisis of Belonging

In education, belonging refers to the extent to which students feel connected, respected, and integrated within their school community. It extends beyond physical presence in a classroom to encompass the quality of interpersonal relationships and students' perceptions of whether they feel valued, included, and understood (Walker et al., 2025). A school is more than a structure. It is a network of human interactions that either reinforce or erode a student's sense of worth and inclusion. When students feel they belong, they are more likely to build strong commitments to peers, educators, and the institution itself, creating conditions for deeper engagement and academic success (Grover et al., 2021). The connection is characterized by positive social relationships (Falkenberg & Heringer, 2024) and affirming perceptions of one's role and identity within the school (Raniti et al., 2022). Without this emotional and relational grounding, students struggle to engage fully, no matter how well lessons are delivered or how rigorous the curriculum may be (Tutt, 2025). These factors collectively illustrate that belonging is essential for student thriving and significantly influences how deeply students engage with and succeed within their school community.

The need for belonging is anchored in both psychological and biological processes. Disconnection from school can damage a student's mental and physical health (Ralph, 2022). When students feel isolated, their emotional well-being declines, often leading to depression and anxiety (Swaner & Wolfe, 2021). In more severe cases, the absence of supportive relationships is associated with suicidal thoughts, disordered eating, and other high-risk behaviours (Grover et al., 2021). These mental health concerns are compounded by academic stress and can trigger a destructive cycle whereby emotional distress leads to absenteeism and academic decline, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and disconnection (Raniti et al., 2022). The

absence of belonging can create many emotional, physical and academic challenges, making it crucial for schools to prioritize belonging as an essential dimension of student well-being.

Behaviourally, students who lack belonging may withdraw or engage in harmful actions. Disengagement, apathy, bullying, aggression, and victimization are frequently linked to diminished attachment to school (Grover et al., 2021). Risk-taking behaviours, including vandalism, substance use, smoking, and early sexual activity, are also more prevalent when students feel marginalized or excluded from the school community (Riley, 2021). These behaviours reflect underlying relational vulnerabilities, emphasizing the importance of cultivating environments wherein students experience consistent support, connection, and affirmation.

Structural and cultural factors further contribute to this growing sense of disconnection. Experiences of bullying, racism, gender bias, and cultural or religious marginalization can profoundly undermine students' connection to school (Falkenberg & Heringer, 2024). When students do not see themselves represented in curriculum, staffing, or leadership, or when school expectations are unclear, inconsistently enforced, or culturally narrow, schools may unintentionally alienate rather than affirm (Grover et al., 2021). Such environments often lead to chronic absenteeism, declining motivation, diminished self-worth, and long-term disengagement from school life (Ralph, 2022). Addressing these systemic issues is critical for building school communities wherein all students feel respected, supported, and empowered to fully participate.

Weak relational grounding, emotional distress, declining physical well-being, harmful behaviours, exclusionary structures, and cultural gaps collectively contribute to an escalating crisis of student disconnection and lack of belonging in schools (Raniti et al., 2022). Belonging is not a luxury; it is foundational to learning, resilience, and student success (2024 Student Voice Report). Schools must prioritize belonging as a core component of their educational mission, recognizing that students flourish when they experience connection and falter when they do not. Acknowledging and addressing this crisis is therefore key for building learning environments that support holistic student development.

Creating the Environment for Student Belonging

Policy directives from Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning K-12 Safe and Caring Schools provide a structured framework for whole-school planning that addresses a range of factors that influence student belonging such as student presence and engagement (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning [MEECL], 2023), safety and belonging (MEECL, 2017), bullying (MEECL, 2014), and human diversity (MEECL, 2015). These policies highlight the necessity of deliberate and coordinated action that supports safety, inclusivity, and positive relationships across the institution. Effective school planning therefore requires deliberate attention to relational grounding, which is impacted by structural supports and culturally responsive practices. Such planning strengthens school communities, enhances student wellness, improves behaviour, and creates a climate in which belonging is both expected and experienced (Swaner & Wolfe, 2021). Aligning policy with practice cultivates a successful school culture.

Relational Grounding in the Classroom

To translate a schoolwide commitment to belonging into meaningful practice, relational grounding must begin at the classroom level, where students experience the most immediate and frequent interactions that shape their sense of connection (MEECL, 2017). Because students spend the majority of their school day in classroom communities, the quality of teacher and student relationships, expectations, student input, and instructional practices implemented within this setting profoundly influences how valued and supported they feel. When educators consciously embed relational practices into instruction and daily classroom life, they create

environments that foster both emotional security and academic engagement (Boaler, 2019). These relational foundations form the basis of student flourishing.

Building on this foundation, relational grounding in the classroom is essential to establishing an environment wherein students feel known, valued, and supported. Strong teacher-student relationships serve as the cornerstone of this work. Teachers who intentionally learn students' interests, cultural backgrounds, strengths, and individual needs communicate that each student matters (Berger et al., 2020). These relational investments enhance student motivation, engagement, and resilience (Mulder, 2025). Students are more willing to take risks, contribute to discussions, and seek help when their relationships with teachers are grounded in trust. By fostering meaningful connections, educators create the relational conditions necessary for students to thrive both academically and socially.

Equally central to relational grounding are clear expectations. When expectations are co-constructed, explicitly taught, and consistently upheld, they reduce ambiguity and promote psychological safety. Students benefit from predictable structures that help them navigate academic and social challenges with confidence (Mulder, 2025). By providing clear and consistent expectations, educators create learning environments in which all students can participate fully and contribute to the classroom community.

In addition, incorporating student voice and choice further deepens belonging and forms relationship. Opportunities for students to express opinions, influence learning processes, and select meaningful pathways affirm their autonomy and identity. Voice and choice counteract feelings of invisibility and disengagement by positioning students as active contributors to their own learning (Tutt, 2025). Providing these opportunities strengthens students' ownership and reinforces their commitment to the classroom community. In this way, student voice and choice serve as critical relational practices that enhance student engagement and connection.

Classroom protocols such as structured discussions, collaborative group roles, opening circles, and regular emotional check-ins establish predictable routines that support inclusive and equitable interactions (Expeditionary Learning, 2013). These practices strengthen communication skills, promote healthy conflict resolution, and reinforce mutual respect. When implemented consistently, protocols help cultivate a classroom community in which all students feel welcome to participate and confident that their contributions are valued and respected. Such routines provide the structural backbone that supports the relational foundation established through expectations, relationships, and voice.

Collectively, these classroom practices establish the relational base necessary for belonging to take root. Trusting teacher and student relationships, clear expectations, authentic opportunities for student voice, and predictable routines encourage students to experience the classroom as a safe and meaningful community. When relational grounding is deliberately woven into everyday instruction, students are more likely to approach learning with engagement, confidence, and resilience (Spyksma, 2025). This comprehensive approach demonstrates that belonging is a tangible outcome of calculated classroom practice, linking classroom experiences of students to the broader vision of a supportive school community.

Relational Grounding in Structural Practices

While classrooms serve as primary sites of student experiences, schoolwide structures also play a decisive role in shaping belonging. Careful scheduling, the organization of time, institutional practices, planned spaces, and approaches to discipline send powerful signals about which needs are prioritized and how relationships are supported. Thoughtful structural design can create predictable, caring, and connected environments (Swaner & Wolfe, 2021), whereas poorly aligned structures can unintentionally undermine relational efforts at the classroom level (Riley, 2021). Therefore, fostering belonging requires extending relational grounding beyond individual teacher practices to the systems and routines that define the broader school context, ensuring coherence between daily classroom experiences and

institutional priorities. This alignment makes certain that relational commitments are woven into both pedagogy and the organizational fabric of the school.

Structural practices play a critical role in supporting relational development across the school. Deliberate scheduling, for example, is particularly influential. Carving out time for daily homeroom or Student Life Groups (SLGs) provides regular, dedicated spaces for social-emotional learning, character development, and community building in smaller cohorts (Berger et al., 2020). Assigning small groups of grade-level students to the same teacher across the school year fosters relational continuity, enabling educators to monitor student well-being more effectively and respond to emerging needs (Mulder, 2025). By prioritizing structured time for relationship building, schools establish consistent opportunities for meaningful connections that reinforce a strong sense of belonging.

Professional collaboration time is equally important in supporting relational grounding. When teachers have structured opportunities to coordinate relational strategies, align expectations, and reflect on practice, the result is greater consistency and coherence across the school community (Swaner & Wolfe, 2021). Assemblies organized with tailored themes and appropriate frequency reinforce shared values, celebrate diversity, and strengthen collective identity. Similarly, lunchtime clubs offer additional opportunities for students to form connections around shared interests, bridging social groups and grade levels (Boaler, 2019). These practices together demonstrate how coordinated structures extend relational grounding beyond individual classrooms to shape a cohesive and supportive school culture.

Physical environments also communicate values and shape student relationships. Flexible, versatile furniture supports project-based learning and peer interaction, reinforcing a culture of cooperation rather than competition (Ralph, 2022). Beyond classrooms, comfortable and accessible gathering spaces, such as library commons, open learning areas, and student hangout spaces, encourage positive social engagement, contributing to a welcoming school climate. Thoughtful design of the physical environment thus complements relational practices by offering spaces where interaction, collaboration, and inclusion can occur naturally (Berger et al., 2020). When physical spaces reflect relational values, students perceive the school as an environment that supports their well-being and social development.

Discipline practices grounded in restoration rather than punishment are imperative to relational belonging. Restorative approaches emphasize accountability, communication and reintegration, allowing students to repair harm without being alienated. Such practices uphold students' dignity, promote social-emotional growth, and maintain connections to the school community even during challenging moments (Watts & Robertson, 2022). By framing discipline through a relational lens, schools communicate that all students are valued members of the community, even when mistakes occur. These restorative approaches strengthen trust and ensure that behavioural supports align with broader goals of belonging.

When structural practices are purposefully designed with relational grounding in mind, they create a coherent environment in which all students feel supported and engaged. Scheduling, collaborative planning, space design, and restorative discipline work together to sustain meaningful relationships and reinforce a culture of care (Riley, 2021). These structural elements enhance daily interactions and influence long-term patterns of engagement, behaviour, and well-being. In this way, relationally aligned structures serve as the backbone of a flourishing school community.

Relational Grounding in Cultural Practices

Belonging is deeply shaped by culture: the norms, values, and identity signals that define how students experience life within a school community (MEECL, 2015). Cultural practices determine whether students see themselves reflected in curriculum, represented among staff, and respected in daily interactions. Because belonging is influenced by students' identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences, relational grounding must also operate at a cultural level

(Van der boom, 2021). Culturally responsive practices help ensure that the school environment is not only welcoming but also affirming of diversity and committed to equity. In this way, culture becomes a central element through which relational belonging is communicated and sustained.

Culturally responsive teaching ensures that students' identities, languages, histories, and lived experiences are meaningfully embedded within curriculum and classroom interactions. This approach affirms student identity and also increases the relevance and accessibility of learning, helping students feel seen and valued. By linking instruction to students' cultural assets, teachers stimulate deeper engagement and create equitable conditions for participation. Culturally responsive pedagogy fortifies relational grounding by aligning academic experiences with students' realities (Ralph, 2022). When instruction is culturally responsive, classrooms become spaces where identity and learning work together to support belonging.

A dedicated cultural support position further supports these school efforts by coordinating equity initiatives, supporting culturally responsive decision-making, and monitoring patterns of inclusion. Through leadership of diversity and inclusion committees, this role helps evaluate policies and practices to ensure they reflect principles of equity and relational grounding. The position also provides conflict resolution support, helping students navigate cultural misunderstandings and identity-based challenges. As a liaison between the school and families of the school community, the cultural support position enhances and nurtures positive home-to-school relationships that promote trust, communication, and community cohesion. This role ensures that cultural responsiveness extends beyond individual classrooms and into school culture.

Cultural practices that affirm diversity and promote equity are essential for cultivating a genuine sense of belonging. When schools integrate culturally responsive teaching, equity-focused leadership, and inclusive family engagement, they create environments wherein every student feels recognized and respected (Van der boom, 2021). These cultural foundations reinforce the relational and structural supports that enable students to thrive, ensuring that belonging is not situational but systemic. Culturally grounded practices enable schools to become communities where all identities are valued and all students are positioned to flourish.

Conclusion

Student belonging must move from a peripheral concern to a central element of school well-being, engagement, and academic achievement. Schools that prioritize relational grounding within classrooms, intentionally design structures that support community, and cultivate culturally responsive practices create positive school climates where students feel valued, safe, and connected (Walker et al., 2025). These environments reduce harmful behaviours and emotional distress along with promoting resilience, motivation, and academic success (Riley, 2022). When belonging becomes an organizing principle rather than an afterthought, schools move closer to fulfilling their mission of supporting the flourishing of all students.

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SPECIAL INTEREST PAPER

How Can Coaching and Mentoring Practices Be Improved To Better Support New Teachers in Rural and Remote Communities in Ghana?

Mavis Abotsi

In Ghana, supporting early-career teachers in rural and remote communities poses unique challenges that require targeted, context-sensitive solutions. These challenges include professional isolation, multi-grade classrooms, limited access to mentorship, and insufficient opportunities for professional development. Economic constraints and geographic isolation contribute to the educational quality gap between urban and rural schools (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2024). Rural schools frequently lack essential learning materials, facilities, and skilled educators. The induction and retention of new teachers in rural and remote areas remain pressing concerns within Ghana's educational landscape. Although national policies acknowledge the importance of mentorship, their practical implementation is often inconsistent or under-resourced in rural settings.

Drawing on instructional coaching frameworks developed by Knight (2017) and Toll (2018), this paper explores context-sensitive strategies to strengthen coaching and mentoring for novice teachers in these underserved areas. With personal insights grounded in experience as an educator in Ghana, the analysis bridges global theories with local realities to propose actionable solutions that enhance early-career teacher support and retention. According to Knight (2018), instructional coaching places a strong emphasis on goal-oriented communication, active listening, and partnership principles. Effective coaching should be dialogical, courteous, and centered on giving teachers the tools they need to make wise decisions about their work. In a similar vein, Toll (2018) emphasized the importance of collaborative inquiry in coaching relationships and contends that coaching needs to be flexible enough to accommodate teachers' unique needs and circumstances. Toll's focus on reflection and trust-building is in line with the mentoring requirements of educators working in remote or underprivileged areas.

Rural Education in Ghana

Ghana's rural education system is marked by several persistent challenges. The Ghana Education Service (GES, 2022) reported that over 70% of basic schools are in rural areas, facing chronic shortages of qualified teachers, infrastructural deficits, and limited access to professional development. Teacher attrition in these regions is disproportionately high, with studies showing many early-career teachers either resigning or transferring to urban centers within their first five years (Sabates et al., 2021). Furthermore, although the GES has outlined induction policies, including mentoring through *The National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 2017), enforcement and supervision in rural districts remain weak. Many new teachers are placed without structured onboarding or consistent professional guidance. These gaps highlight an urgent need for contextually grounded mentoring and coaching programs.

Lived Insights

As someone who began a teaching career in Ghana's rural Upper East Region, I experienced firsthand the sense of isolation and professional uncertainty that comes with being newly posted to a remote community. Lacking a mentor, I often relied on outdated textbooks and peer improvisation. My experience is not unique: many colleagues share stories of

navigating complex classroom dynamics and community expectations without formal guidance. These human experiences emphasize why mentoring should not be a theoretical ideal but a tangible, sustainable practice.

From my experience, teachers in rural and remote areas of some parts of Ghana often encounter a mix of personal and professional challenges that can impede their effectiveness and longevity in the profession. These challenges include limited mentorship opportunities, student behavioural issues, insufficient access to quality professional development, and professional isolation. Multi-grade classrooms and cultural dissonance between teaching materials and the community context further worsen the difficulties. Gee (2000) highlighted how contextual factors influence discourse and identity, suggesting that mentoring programs should consider the cultural and social dimensions of teacher identity in rural schools.

Equity must be central to any mentoring and coaching program in rural areas. Geographic isolation, limited technological infrastructure, and cultural marginalization all contribute to inequitable learning and teaching environments. However, incorporating Indigenous perspectives and community voices into the mentoring framework can enhance cultural responsiveness. For example, when I was teaching in Ghana's Upper East Region, a mentoring initiative called the Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) project collaborated with rural colleges of education and basic schools to improve teaching and learning outcomes (Transforming Teaching, Education & Learning, 2021).

One significant challenge identified was the disparity in professional development opportunities for teachers in rural areas versus their urban counterparts. Many teachers in these areas had limited access to in-service training due to poor road networks, a lack of internet access, and underfunded schools. I recall that T-TEL addressed the issue by establishing locally based mentoring clusters that used equity as a guiding principle. The T-TEL initiative in Ghana serves as a compelling case study of how mentoring can be adapted to rural contexts. T-TEL partnered with colleges of education and basic schools to enhance teacher preparation and provide ongoing professional support. A key innovation was the creation of mentoring clusters that trained experienced teachers to serve as mentors for their peers in rural schools.

These clusters operated on principles of equity and access, ensuring that mentorship was not dependent on proximity to urban centers. By embedding mentorship within the community, the T-TEL model reduced logistical barriers and fostered ownership among educators. During my time teaching in Ghana's Upper East Region, I directly experienced the impact of this model. As a new teacher, I was paired with a trained school-based mentor who provided support in lesson planning, classroom management, and navigating the local community context. The mentoring relationship was informal in tone but structured in function, blending Knight's (2017) dialogical coaching style with Toll's (2018) collaborative inquiry model.

The program's success highlighted several key principles for rural mentorship: proximity, trust, flexibility, and contextual relevance. Rather than relying on externally driven workshops or rigid protocols, T-TEL grounded its approach in the lived realities of rural teachers, which made it support both sustainable and impactful. My time up north was both challenging and transformative, and it solidified my belief in the importance of equity-driven coaching and mentoring frameworks. Despite the benefits of programs like T-TEL, there are still many communities where such formal systems do not exist. In my next posting, I worked in a school with only three other teachers, none of whom had formal mentoring training. Recognizing the need for support, I initiated informal mentoring conversations with a more experienced colleague. We met after school to share lesson plans, discuss discipline issues, and strategize ways to engage students with limited resources.

Although unofficial, these conversations embodied the core principles of effective coaching: mutual respect, reflective dialogue, and co-learning. In the absence of structured professional development, we built a community of practice that was meaningful and sustaining. To further expand our support system, I connected online with teachers from other rural areas, creating a small but active digital network where we exchanged ideas, shared lesson plans, and

encouraged one another. I experienced similar challenges as a new teacher in a Northern Manitoba community in Canada in 2024. Once again, I was placed in a multi-grade classroom, this time in a different cultural setting with its own expectations, languages, and norms.

As a new teacher from a different country and background, I felt the weight of both professional and cultural adjustment in Canada. Through informal peer mentoring, we created a small network of support among teachers. We met weekly to share lesson plans, troubleshoot classroom issues, and provide emotional support. This grassroots initiative mirrored the collaborative inquiry model described by Toll (2018) and highlighted the importance of community and relational trust in teacher development. My experience also emphasized the value of Knight's (2018) coaching principles, particularly the need for dialogical, respectful partnerships. Drawing on Gee's (2000) insights, I also came to understand how identity and context are deeply intertwined in shaping teachers' professional growth. This lived experience affirms the need for structured, equity-oriented mentoring frameworks in similar rural and remote settings.

Many schools in Ghana face significant behavioural challenges in the classroom that affect new teachers' mental, emotional, and professional well-being. If this challenge is unaddressed, it can threaten the long-term sustainability of most educational institutions in the country. Applying a structured coaching and mentoring model, such as that proposed by Knight (2018), can mitigate the challenges by fostering collaborative problem-solving, building capacity, and improving teacher morale. For new teachers working in rural and remote communities, the transition into the profession can be both overwhelming and isolating. Often far from their own families and professional networks, these teachers must quickly adapt to unfamiliar environments, large multi-grade classrooms, and a wide range of student behavioural issues that can deeply affect their confidence and emotional well-being.

In many of these schools, particularly in regions like the Upper East, Ghana, where I started teaching, behavioural challenges are intensified by factors such as poverty, inconsistent attendance, limited parental engagement, and a lack of structured support systems. For example, in my first year of teaching I faced a class where several students arrived late or not at all, disrupted lessons, and showed little respect for authority. Without a mentor or clear behavioural framework in place, I struggled to maintain order and doubted my ability to teach effectively. Despite my enthusiasm and commitment, the daily stress of trying to manage student behaviour alone led to emotional exhaustion. I considered resigning before the end of my first term.

Experiences like mine are not uncommon. For many new teachers in remote areas, behavioural issues are not just classroom challenges; they are personal and professional breaking points. Left unsupported, these early experiences contribute to high attrition rates and undermine the long-term sustainability of education in rural regions. When teachers leave early in their careers, schools are forced to cycle through new hires, disrupting continuity and affecting the quality of student learning.

Theoretical Foundation

To address these challenges, coaching and mentoring can play a transformative role. Knight's (2018) Impact Cycle offers a powerful model for supporting new teachers as they navigate the complexities of classroom behaviour. The approach is grounded in partnership, respect, and collaboration. Rather than telling teachers what to do, instructional coaches work alongside them to identify pressing challenges, explore possible strategies, and support the implementation and reflection process. The three stages – Identify, Learn, and Improve – create a structured yet flexible process that empowers teachers to grow in confidence and competence.

If I had been paired with a trained mentor or instructional coach, my story might have been different. Through regular, non-judgmental conversations, I could have explored classroom

management techniques, practiced implementing them, and reflected on what worked and what didn't, all while feeling supported and valued.

In schools where the Impact Cycle model has been piloted, even in rural Ghanaian contexts, new teachers have reported increased job satisfaction, better student engagement, and a greater sense of professional identity. Embedding coaching and mentoring into rural school systems is essential not just for teacher retention but for creating sustainable, thriving learning environments. When new teachers are supported through the emotional and instructional challenges of behaviour management, they are more likely to stay, grow, and contribute meaningfully to their schools. Knight's coaching model offers a clear pathway to achieve this, helping educators move from survival to success, even in the most remote corners of the educational landscape.

Global Insights: Adapting Successful Models to Ghana

Several countries facing similar rural education challenges have successfully implemented scalable coaching programs. In Kenya, for instance, the Tusome ("let's read") project used local literacy coaches to provide feedback and materials to rural teachers (Piper et al., 2018). Coaches visited schools monthly, offering consistent support and monitoring. Similarly, in India, the Gyan Shala initiative trained women in communities to act as co-teachers and mentors, significantly improving instructional quality (Education Support Organization, n.d.). These models show that context-aware, low-cost mentorship solutions are possible and effective (Education Support Organization, n.d.).

For Ghana, adopting a hybrid of these models, leveraging local human resources, and pairing them with structured frameworks from Knight and Toll could transform the induction experience for new teachers. Additionally, mobile technology such as SMS coaching reminders, short videos, and chat-based check-ins can extend mentorship reach without major infrastructure investments.

Improving mentoring in Ghana's rural schools requires a multipronged approach: Localized Coaching Clusters, Hybrid Mentorship Models, Training for Rural Coaches, Policy Integration, and Monitoring.

Localized Coaching Clusters

Rural districts can develop Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) that align with Knight's coaching cycle (DuFour et al., 2016). These can be led by experienced educators trained as peer coaches who meet biweekly with new teachers. Virtual platforms such as WhatsApp or Zoom (where the internet permits) can supplement in-person meetings.

Hybrid Mentorship Models

Combining Toll's inquiry-based approach with community mentorship, districts can pair new teachers not only with instructional coaches but also with local elders or opinion leaders. This dual mentorship acknowledges both pedagogical and socio-cultural integration, critical for rural success.

Training for Rural Coaches

Existing instructional coaches should undergo professional development on culturally responsive coaching. Using materials adapted from Knight and Toll, training sessions can emphasize listening, questioning, and feedback practices that reflect local teaching realities.

Policy Integration and Monitoring

GES should embed these coaching strategies in their National Teacher Induction Policy, ensuring accountability at the district level (National Teaching Council, n.d.). Monitoring tools should include qualitative indicators like teacher confidence and sense of belonging, not just quantitative metrics.

Policy Recommendations

To institutionalize effective mentoring, the following policy actions are recommended:

- Mandate coaching in teacher deployment contracts, especially for rural postings.
- Provide stipend incentives for experienced teachers who mentor others.
- Incorporate coaching and mentoring into CPD (Continuous Professional Development) credits.
- Establish regional centers for coaching resource development and training.
- Involve teacher training colleges in preparing future mentors and coaches.

These recommendations aim to create a sustainable pipeline for mentorship, leadership, and accountability structures in rural education settings. By grounding national policy in the lived realities of educators and supported by proven international practices, Ghana can enhance both teacher performance and retention.

Conclusion

Improving coaching and mentoring practices in rural and remote areas of Ghana is not just a pedagogical necessity; it is a matter of educational justice. Teachers working in underserved regions deserve the same level of support, opportunity, and professional growth as their urban counterparts. To support Ghana's rural educators effectively, coaching and mentoring must go beyond policy documents into daily practice. Grounded in Knight's emphasis on impactful collaboration and Toll's model of mutual inquiry, this proposal advocates a human-centered and context-aware approach. As a future instructional leader, I aim to pilot these strategies in collaboration with district education offices, ensuring that no teacher, regardless of geography, feels unsupported in their formative years. Such systems will not only enhance teacher retention and instructional quality but will also contribute to more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable rural education systems. As my journey has shown, even informal networks of support can be transformative, but with the right structures, policies, and resources, we can multiply this impact and ensure that all teachers, regardless of location, have the tools they need to thrive.

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About the Author

Mavis Sewornu Abra Abotsi is an international M.Ed. student at Brandon University who presently works as an early childhood teacher at Cormorant Lake School in Canada. She concentrates on early childhood education, inclusive practice, and instructional development. Mavis is enthusiastic about reflective teaching and guiding novice teachers. She enjoys reading, traveling, and spending time with her family.

CELEBRATION OF SCHOLARSHIP

We are honoured to recognize the following students who defended M.Ed. theses in 2025.

Amy Portey

August 25, 2025

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Cathryn Smith

Teacher Experiences of Efficacy Development, Professional Learning, School Culture and Their Relationship to Teacher Well-Being

Teacher experiences of efficacy development, professional learning, school culture and their relationship to teacher well-being were explored using a convergent parallel mixed-methods survey design. Twenty-three kindergarten to grade twelve teachers from three rural southern Manitoba school divisions responded to the adapted on-line Internal Coherence Survey. Descriptive statistics and open coding were used to analyze the data. The positive experiences that teachers shared informed the recommended cycle of collective vision building, collaborative instruction planning, and supportive implementation as a model for leaders navigating the ongoing changes in education while supporting efficacy development, professional learning experiences, and teacher well-being. Teacher voice, direction, collaboration, and support are essential elements in the school culture required for successful implementation of this cycle.

Carla Bonar

August 25, 2025

Thesis Supervisors: Dr. Burcu Ntelioglou
Dr. Alysha Farrell

Towards Inclusion: Curriculum Discourse Analysis of Play-based Pedagogy for Autistic Learners

According to Barbara Johnstone (2018), discourse shapes and is shaped by world view. Word choice and omissions of word choice can create potential silences to shape what people imagine. These imaginings extend to views about ability, play, and pedagogy. Curriculum is a written discourse for educators that shapes pedagogical practice. The purpose of this study was to explore the discourse of the kindergarten curriculum support document A Time for Learning a Time for Joy (ATLATJ) to identify potential omissions and silences when considering inclusive play-based programming for autistic kindergarten students. Barbara Johnstone's heuristics were used to examine how the use of linguistic qualifiers and syntax in discourse created silences and omissions of how educators, teachers, and play were imagined in Manitoba kindergarten classrooms. Discourse analysis of two sample chapters identified euphemisms, normative bias, and potential silences related to terms of ability, pedagogy, and play. The identified omissions and silences posed potential barriers to appropriate and inclusive educational programming for autistic students. Implications for authentic inclusive programming that align with proposed consideration of humanistic and phenomenological curricular approaches were considered for future revisions.