Teacher Commitment in Sustainable Learning Communities:
A New "Ancient" Story of Educational Leadership

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Abstract

The findings from this qualitative case study reveal how a principal's demonstration of compassion and deep care towards his teachers was influential in the participants' renewed desire for a greater commitment to and improvement of their craft. Understanding how school leaders can nourish and sustain passion and commitment is an essential area of research on learning communities. Exploring the impact of emotions in leadership is highlighted as an important consideration for fostering conditions for sustainable learning communities.

Keywords: Emotions in leadership, teacher commitment, personal growth, sustainable learning communities

Résumé

Les résultats de cette étude de cas qualitative révèlent à quel point la manifestation de compassion et l'attention profonde de la part d'un principal envers les professeurs ont eu une influence dans le désir renouvelé des participants pour un plus grand engagement et une amélioration de leur métier. Comprendre comment les chefs d'établissement peuvent nourrir et maintenir la passion et l'engagement est un domaine essentiel de la recherche sur les communautés d'apprentissage. Explorer l'impact des émotions dans le leadership est souligné comme étant un facteur important dont il faut tenir compte afin d'encourager les conditions favorables à l'établissement de communautés d'apprentissage durables.

Mots-clés: Émotions en matière de leadership, engagement des enseignants, développement personnelle, communautés d'apprentissage durables

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As leaders, as neighbors, as colleagues, it is time to turn to one another, to engage in the intentional search for human goodness. (Wheatley, 2005, p. 57)

Compassion, joy, love—these deep human capacities are essential components of educational leadership that evoke and sustain teacher commitment in learning communities. Leadership that can nourish and sustain passion and commitment is needed as educators are, more and more, challenged to adapt and shift their practices and mindsets in the rapidly changing educational landscape. As will be described in this article, the participants in a small case study on teacher commitment (Cherkowski, 2004) revealed that the principal's commitment to the teachers' well-being and his demonstration of compassion and deep care for them through his work were important influences on how they were beginning to feel a renewed desire to focus on their commitment to their work and improve their craft.

Sustainability, both ecological and social, has become the desired state for our over-extended society. Similarly, finding ways to establish and maintain sustainable leadership within learning communities is an important component of school improvement research (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009). Building on their learning community model, Mitchell and Sackney's (2009) sustainable learning community theory is underpinned by a living systems model of organization in which sustainable learning communities are identified by high capacity school cultures characterized by notions of wholeness, connectedness, meaning, commitment, and depth. Moreover, in sustainable learning communities, continuous learning and reflection infuse a school culture of collaboration developed through shared values and beliefs.

Teacher commitment has traditionally been understood as the desire to remain with an organization (Bedeian, Kemery, & Pizzolatto, 1991; Blau, 1988, 1989). However, if teacher commitment is conceptualized more broadly as the desire to continue to grow and learn within a professional community of colleagues, the connection between teacher commitment and sustainable learning communities becomes quite clear. Sustaining vibrant learning communities requires more than teachers' commitment to remain with the organization—it requires a commitment to continued growth and learning that is shared with colleagues.

Darling-Hammond (1997) wrote, "When all is said and done, what matters most for students' learning are the commitments and capacities of their teachers" (p. 293). Over a decade later, understanding how to engage the deep commitment and capacity of teachers remains essential to achieving sustainable learning communities for our children. I argue that one of the important, and underexplored, avenues to tapping into a heightened sense of commitment to professional growth and learning for teachers may be through a more fully human experience in the school. By this, I mean that educators be encouraged—through the actions, words, and attitudes of the school leader and others in the professional community—to bring deep human emotions of, for example, love, joy, and compassion into their work in the school, instead of leaving it at the door at the beginning of the day, to be picked up at the end of the day on their way home. Rather, teachers would infuse their work with all of the rich aspects of their emotional lives;

school leaders might encourage and support this wholeness though modeling, infusing their own work with authentic emotional expressions, as well as personal and meaningful connections with learning community members.

Framing Leadership for Teacher Commitment: The New Ancient Story

Exploring the importance of emotions, recognizing the impact of ignoring the full human experience in organizations, researching from a strengths-based perspective, mining organizations for virtuous behaviors—these are new ways of researching and understanding how to develop and design organizations that "not only elevate and connect human strengths (internally) but serve to refract and magnify our highest human strengths into society" (Cooperride, n.d.). Findings from research in positive organizational scholarship, a new discipline that emerged out of organizational studies, highlight that "concepts about virtue, compassion, and positivity may seem simple but they turn out to be crucial elements for broader success" (Pace, 2010, p. 1). In this article, I use a positive organizational scholarship perspective as a new theoretical frame for understanding teacher commitment and educational leadership within a learning community. Viewed through this theoretical lens, the deep human capacities—such as love, joy, and compassion—in the daily work of formal school leaders and teachers are more explicitly noticed, appreciated, and recognized as important components for fostering and sustaining teacher commitment for professional growth in learning communities.

I take my lead in telling these stories of the importance of exploring the human capacities in leadership from the writings of Margaret Wheatley (1992, 2005, 2009). She argued for telling the "new ancient story" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 6) of leadership as a way of connecting to one another and accessing the hope, love, resiliency, and human spirit in our organizations and societies. A broader understanding of leadership that includes a full range of human capacities and potential within our school organizations would highlight the stories of human spirit, goodness, and wholeness. We need to access these implicit and assumed stories of goodness and wholeness, to shine a light on these stories, and to render them more explicit as we interpret them and construct their meaning and potential for school leadership.

Wheatley (2005) asserted that in the future, "those organizations who will succeed are those that evoke our greatest human capacities—our need to be in good relationships, and our desire to contribute to something beyond ourselves" (Wheatley, p.124). She suggested that we all know this story of love, compassion, connectedness, and of wanting to contribute to something beyond ourselves, but that we need storytellers who are courageous enough to speak openly about this new way of leadership. As educational researchers, we can contribute to the search for human goodness in our schools and communicate the findings of this search in our writing. This article is my contribution to the work of telling the story of leadership that is infused with the power of love, caring, and compassion through the stories of two teachers, Martha and Delaware, in a case study on teacher commitment.

Weaving the Story: Teacher Commitment and Sustainable Leadership

The qualitative case study took place over the course of four months in the winter and spring of 2004 in a small elementary school in central British Columbia. The school was purposely selected based on the superintendent's beliefs that this school was moving in the direction of establishing a learning community culture within the school. Three teachers and the principal were selected based on their interest in participating in this study. Data were collected through participant observations, three long interviews, and participant journal entries. Data were analyzed for emergent themes using constant comparative analysis techniques, and were subsequently presented in a narrative form. I do not generalize the findings of this study beyond the context of this case. Rather, I offer the interpretations of the experiences gleaned from a rich and thick description of this case for reflecting on the potential for thinking in new ways about teacher commitment, educational leadership, and sustainable learning communities.

Throughout the remainder of this article, I weave a story of leadership that inspired increased teacher commitment with threads of literature and theory on sustainable leadership for learning communities. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) asserted that "the ultimate goal for sustainable leadership in a complex, knowledge-sharing society is for schools to become professional learning communities" (p.125). They described four pillars that support sustainable communities: Learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). For the most part, schools have excelled in creating opportunities for students to know and to do. More opportunities are needed for eliciting how to learn to be and to live well together. Similarly, opportunities for teachers to learn to be more fully human through their work and to learn to live well together in their professional role could provide a broader and potentially more meaningful journey of growth and learning as a teacher. We can learn from the stories in this case study about how the leader's attention to the human capacities of the teachers and other community members was credited by the teachers as an influencing factor in their renewed desire for professional learning and growth.

Fostering a sustainable learning community depends in part on the leader's ability to create conditions in which teachers learn to recognize and challenge the usefulness of their existing beliefs and practices in order to improve their students' education. This level of change demands much of teachers and requires an environment of trust and support in which teachers feel free to try out new beliefs and practices, make mistakes, learn from these mistakes, and try again—a positive and supportive emotional climate is critical. Principals will need to create conditions that evoke a desire for leadership and commitment from others in the community to contribute to developing and sustaining shared visions, goals, and purposes. Senge (2008) suggested that "ultimately, leadership is about how we shape the futures that we truly desire, as opposed to try as best we can to cope with circumstances we believe are beyond our control" (p.372). The story of this principal's authentic emotional expression through his leadership provides a narrative example of how teachers were positively influenced to consider a shift towards creating the future goal that they came to desire for their school: a learning community.

Transformational, heroic, distributed, sustainable, charismatic—these are some of the myriad of descriptors that educational researchers have attributed to various types of leadership for school improvement. These descriptions of leadership have been

important for how we have learned to identify and develop leadership practices for school improvement. We need to continue to explore the concept of leadership for fostering and sustaining learning communities, but also to widen our focus to include all four pillars of sustainable leadership. The purpose of this article is to provide a vivid description of the stories of teachers as they experienced a school leader modeling what it meant to learn to be and to live well together. Through these stories I aim to open a space for noticing and reflecting on the potential positive changes in schools when we honour and embrace the human capacities of teachers and other school leaders. Exploring these two pillars of sustainable leadership—learning to be and learning to live well together—highlights opportunities to create meaningful professional relationships and to experience emotional commitments at work that may contribute to fostering an emotional climate in which teachers and their students can thrive.

Norm's Vision: Creating a Learning Community

The principal, Norm, was new to this school. He had experience with similar schools—small, inner city elementary schools—and felt at home in this demographic. In this small school, he was attempting to change the school culture from that of a hierarchical institution to that of a learning community in which teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members worked together following a shared mission and common values, and in which they engaged in collective and continuous learning for student improvement. The staff at this school had been stable for many years and resisted change. The principal recognized early in the year that his pursuit would be difficult. Still, his ambition was to replace the title on his door from "principal" to "head learner."

Norm knew that he wanted to create an environment of trust and support—an environment in which the teachers would choose to join him in shifting the school's culture to that of a professional learning community. Over the last decade, educational research has shown that organizing schools as professional learning communities can have positive impacts (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Marks, 1998; Hord & Summer, 2008). As research on and implementation of professional learning communities has increased, the understanding of the original use of the term has shifted somewhat. I use the term 'sustainable learning community' to denote an organic and ecological systems interpretation of the school culture characterized by continuous learning, deep collaboration, and respect (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009), rather than a routine implementation of collaborative meetings that have become popularly known as "PLC's." The concept of learning communities originated in the research on learning organizations where "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning to grow together" (Senge, 1990, p. 3). Sustainable learning communities reflect the essence of continuous learning and can evolve through the deep learning that happens as members collaboratively construct a school culture shaped by shared beliefs, values, vision, leadership, and professional practice (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009).

The principal is a central, though not solitary, agent in establishing a culture in which a learning community might grow and flourish, ensuring conditions in which trust and respect are high, teachers are empowered to share in leadership, media are

established for the flow of feedback, incentive and reward initiatives are in place, and a supportive and caring environment is established for all individuals within the community. While the construction and maintenance of the community is a collaborative effort on the part of all members, research recognizes the importance of the principal in ensuring that the effort is achieved and sustained (Beck & Foster, 1999; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommer, 2008; Speck, 1999). Leadership for a sustainable learning community depends on the willing participation of the members of that community. Leaders must find ways to establish and nurture the affective conditions and organizational structures that evoke the desire for participation from others in the community (Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Wheatley, 2009). In this case study, Norm was successful in evoking a renewed sense of commitment and purpose in others as he engaged them consistently in an authentically emotional way. The teachers in this study were beginning to demonstrate a desire to shift and alter their behaviors and attitudes to align with the principal's vision of a learning community in the school.

Norm was committed to creating a healthy environment in which students and teachers were happy and felt good about themselves. He worked closely with a small group of staff who believed in learning from mistakes, taking risks, treating all people with respect, and having fun along the way. Norm endeavored to create an atmosphere of trust, care, compassion, and joy in the school through his consistent attention to creating deep connections with his teachers, staff, and students. As the teachers in this study noted, his kind actions and words, his modeled caring, and his exuberance and joy were some of the reasons why they were beginning to pay attention to the larger professional culture outside their classrooms.

Chicken Soup: Leadership as Compassion

"Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources. It renews people's energy" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.191). The teachers in this study admitted that the demands of their work often took a toll on the rest of their lives. They were working in what some of them termed a "have-not" school. The social challenges and issues related to poverty at this school took an emotional toll on these teachers. They described how they had set boundaries for themselves in order to do their best for their students, yet not feel that they were personally taking on all of the children's problems. Martha, one of the teachers in the study, mentioned that this job "could eat you alive if you let it. I've had to learn to let go." Martha worked closely with her teaching partner, Delaware. These two were passionate about the work they did with their classes and had learned through the years at that school to rely on each other rather than others on the staff. They felt safe with each other to share the joys and disappointments in their work and their personal lives.

Martha and Delaware acted as a support for one another and helped to sustain each other through the demands of the school year. They had never before felt that the administration was a support for them and described how they felt they had to hide their stress from the school leadership. Martha describes having had moments of needing to withdraw from school completely in order to deal with difficulties in her personal life. For example, to deal with a difficult divorce she explained how she had taken two weeks of stress leave several years prior. She admitted, "Had I had the admin. support, I'm sure

I would have hung in here and done it, but I sure didn't, so it was like, 'Forget it! You know what, I've done so much and you know what, I'm outta here!' I still can't believe I did that. I don't usually stand up for myself and I don't usually take the time for myself." Martha felt that she did not have the principal's support in this difficult time in her life, that the crisis in her personal life was not an issue for which she could get support from the administrator. Although she recognized that her students' lives impacted what they did in her classroom, she didn't feel that previous principals had recognized the impact of the fullness of her own life, both in terms of the challenges and the triumphs, in the work that she could do as a teacher.

As was evidenced in Martha's case, compassion and support from the administrator during a difficult time in her life might have ensured she did not remove herself from her work. Martha was not looking for a shoulder to cry on or a therapist to vent to, she was looking for validation from her leaders that her difficult time in her life was noticed, understood, and honored as opposed to being ignored. She was looking for compassion. Teachers recognize the importance of honoring the whole child, of understanding that the child brings their whole life to the classroom, the good and the bad. For example, the teachers in this study accepted that their students were coming from different and often difficult home lives, and that these conditions affect their learning. Delaware asserted that she prided herself on "accepting whoever it is who walks through those doors." She and Martha often found themselves providing food for a hungry child, or following up on a health issue that they knew about. They reflected the importance of "giving voice to students' lives outside our very particular and important classroom" (Smith & Park, 2003, p. 37) as a vital step in establishing an inclusive and supportive environment in which their students could thrive emotionally and academically.

In contrast, from past teaching experiences, Martha and Delaware described how their lives beyond the school doors were neither acknowledged nor honored. They were used to leaving their life at the door of the school and picking it up on the way home at the end of the day. While they often found this practice dispiriting and exhausting, they had never felt that the richness of their lives—their joys, sorrows, challenges, and triumphs—were welcomed in the school. Their experiences mirrored what Parker Palmer (2007) noted: "We consciously give [emotions] less respect than they deserve because of what we are taught by our culture, 'Don't wear your heart on your sleeve.' The message is simple: if you want to stay safe, hide your feelings" (p.9). To the detriment of the teachers, students, and the learning community as a whole, we often assume that teachers and administrators should keep their emotions to themselves.

Martha and Delaware mentioned what a pleasant surprise it was to notice that the current leader was interested in their mental and emotional health, and that he took steps to get to know them personally. Martha felt that Norm was going out of his way to ensure that the staff felt supported in areas of their life beyond the school. The principal was engaging in brief conversations with the staff throughout the day to connect and share with each of them. Martha appreciated the time and energy these small moments took out of his day. She admitted that she felt buoyed by the principal's caring and believed that it was influencing the commitment that she felt towards her teaching. She recalled how she and several colleagues were talking about their energy levels becoming depleted during the flu season in February and how, the next day, there was a pot of

chicken soup left on the stove in the staffroom for all to enjoy—compliments of the principal. She described how, for her, the pot of soup was a demonstration of caring that played a part in her wanting to engage more deeply with her students and their learning. Perceived as an authentic expression of compassion for the teachers, Norm's caring actions did result in an opening of these teachers' hearts to help them think about new ways of connecting with their colleagues. Intention was important. These same actions used as a means to overtly influence the teachers could have been perceived as a manipulation, and would likely not have had the same results with these teachers.

In this case study, Delaware and Martha credited Norm with the positive changes they were beginning to see in the school organization. They both admitted that the changes they felt in the emotional climate of the school were an impetus for them to begin to build relationships with the larger staff. They trusted the principal and believed that he was working hard to create an inclusive climate in which they felt safe to express themselves and to join in as part of collegial functions. Tschannen-Moran (2004) noted that the effects of betrayal of trust can be lasting and can impact teachers' attitudes about collaborating. The principal plays an important role in setting the tone for teachers to trust one another. In this case study, Delaware had experienced a betrayal of trust many years prior and had closed down to opportunities for collegiality and collaboration. She had since secluded herself to her classroom and had determined that she would not put herself in another situation in which she could be belittled or ridiculed by her colleagues, as she felt had happened before. However, through Norm's consistent demonstration of caring and thoughtfulness, Delaware began to trust that Norm would provide a safe climate among teachers for collegiality and collaboration. She felt Norm was creating enough of a culture of respect and trust that she would begin to reach out to and connect with other teachers. Norm's attention to the teachers' feelings and efforts to validate and honor them as whole people were renewing these teachers' energy and noted as influential in these teachers' commitment to professional learning and growth.

Using a positive organizational scholarship lens for viewing school leadership shifts our view of what we notice and to what we choose to attend. Recent research in positive organizational scholarship explores the importance of compassion, and of noticing and wanting to alleviate the suffering of organizational members (cf. Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Dutton, Frost, & Worline, 2002; Roberts & Dutton, 2009). Using this lens to notice and explicitly frame compassion and other human capacities within the role of school leadership broadens our understanding of the importance of establishing meaningful human connections within the complex webs of relationships that make up a school organization. Applying this lens to school leadership places the focus on being rather than just on doing, on the human capacities, the positive strengths, the role of emotions, and all the different ways we learn to live well together. Creating an environment in which the deepest human capacities are reflected and honored through teachers' work is a new way of thinking about teacher commitment in learning communities. Although Norm likely had personality traits that were naturally amenable to authentic emotional expressions through his leadership, creating a space for nurturing these human capacities in educational leaders widens the possibilities for leadership development and practice. Educational leaders can be more overtly encouraged and supported to engage in their own personal growth as they relate to and with their colleagues in a more meaningful and personal way. Principals can learn to tap into their

own capacity for connecting in an emotional way as they aim to evoke these deeper commitments and capacities from their colleagues.

Sustainable Leadership: Making Time for Personal Growth

The leader in this study exhibited an emotional capacity for engaging teachers in personal conversations, for creating a bond that went beyond the boundaries of the school hallway, and for eliciting a renewed commitment to professional growth. He was described as a leader who "walked the walk" and demonstrated on a daily basis the attitudes and behaviors of a caring and dedicated professional—these were noticed by the teachers in this study and inspired them to grow, learn, and improve professionally. Norm was a genuinely caring person who took the time to learn about his teachers and their lives. Norm's behaviors reflected Goleman, McKee, and Boyatzis' (2002) description of a coach whose positive emotional impact "stems largely from the empathy and rapport a leader establishes with employees … As a result, people sense that a leader cares, so they feel motivated to uphold their own high sense of standards for performance" (p. 62). The field of educational leadership is beginning to recognize the impact of successful coaching practices with teachers for creating conditions for professional learning and growth (Scherer, 2011). Coaching was a natural trait for Norm, and he was comfortable engaging in personal conversations, some more deep than others, that went "beyond short-term concerns and instead explores the person's life, including dreams, life goals, and career hopes" (Goleman, McKee, & Boyatzis, 2002, p. 60). Norm endeavored to learn about the personal lives of the teachers to support them in their work and to better coach them in achieving their professional goals.

Similarly, supporting and coaching school leaders to engage in deeper and more meaningful professional learning relationships with teachers is an important consideration for leadership development. As leaders are encouraged and supported to turn inward toward their own personal growth in their professional capacity they will become more focused on clarifying their own values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and ways of rejuvenating in times of stress (Kaser & Halbert, 2009; Metzger, 2006; Quinn, 2004; Senge, 2007). For example, Metzger's (2006) study on leaders' personal growth strategies revealed over fifty different activities ranging from physical activities such as yoga, running, and stretching to other approaches such as taking breaks, closing their door, journaling, reading, and listening to music. Learning to follow their own unique path to self-awareness through personal growth in their role as educational leaders can be a model for teachers to do the same in their own work. A deeper understanding of the role of self-awareness and personal growth in a professional capacity may provide insights for fostering greater teacher commitment toward professional learning and growth.

There are cautionary notes that accompany the extolled virtues of the woven themes of this story, or what I call a *shadow side* of this story. First, the leader's emotional expressions described through the perceptions of the teachers in this study could be viewed as simply charismatic leadership. This type of leadership tends to reside within the personal qualities of the individual leader, and Norm had plenty of charisma. Charismatic leaders are often able to attract support for their initiatives through their charisma, but this is insufficient for creating enduring shifts in the culture of the school.

Transforming school organizations toward becoming sustainable learning communities necessitates a deeper commitment to personal and organizational growth that goes beyond any one type of leadership style. Leadership for sustainable learning communities means thinking beyond styles, traits, and practices—what leaders know and do. We also need to understand how leaders become more fully human through their work, how they inspire others to do the same, and how they cultivate conditions for community members to learn to live well together. Shifting the focus of what we notice in educational leadership to include emotions and human capacities such as compassion, joy, and love creates a new space for exploring and understanding school leadership for positive transformation at a personal, professional, and organizational level.

Second, although the teachers in this study related a positive experience with and welcomed the principals' emotional capacities, there are likely teachers who did not respond as positively to Norm's emotional expressions or to his efforts to create a learning community culture in the school. Norm wanted the teachers to share in his quest to shift and shape the school. We do not hear about the teachers' visions for the school—these may or may not align with the leader's view. Woods (2007) suggested that establishing learning communities might not be as democratic a practice as is assumed and may result in alienation among those who are outside of the dominant opinion or the dominant culture. Norm recognized the importance of creating a leadership team that shared his vision of change and with whom he could meet regularly to share his goals, plans, disappointments, and challenges. We do not hear the stories of resistance, dissent, and conflict among the leadership team or the teachers outside of the team. As learning community theory gains further traction in practice, we need to ensure that establishing supportive and collegial communities in schools does not dampen or extinguish opportunities for colleagues to question, debate, and disagree with one another as they mindfully and collaboratively co-construct their community. These kinds of stories are not evident in this account, but they are important stories to hear and learn from if we are to fully explore the potential for fostering and sustaining teacher commitment in learning communities.

Conclusions

We have lived for many decades with a story of organizations as machines. This story reflected our need for clinical, linear, and predictable behavior that could be managed by similarly predictable leadership. However, we are awakening to the recognition that our human creations are "complex, tangled, messy webs of relationships" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 25). We need an understanding of leadership that embraces the messiness of being human and that reflects "a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us as humans" (Wheatley, 2005, p. 21). These stories of "messiness" are what are missing from discussions of leadership for sustainable learning communities. We need to start telling stories that may evoke in school leaders a desire for deeper connection; for role modeling of compassion, joy, love, and kindness; and for sharing through their work what it can mean to be fully human. We can start to tell stories that help us to learn to be and to learn to live well together in schools.

The teachers in this study reported that the principal's authentic expressions of emotion were an important influence on how they were beginning to feel a renewed

desire to focus on their commitment to their work and an improvement in their craft. As we search for ways to sustain our resources, both ecologically and socially, we might think about more overtly accessing the human capacities of our school organizations and paying attention to Wheatley's (2005) message, "It is time to become passionate about what's best in us and to create organizations that welcome in our creativity, contribution, and compassion" (p.57).

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