

The Last Word

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Every Connection Matters

I have clear memories of my early elementary and secondary school years. Many of those memories are positive, but certainly not all. I can remember moments of feeling awkward, different, and judged. When I think about it, the same can be said for my high school years, and moving into adulthood. But those are not the moments that I recognize as pivotal in the formulation of the human I have become: in my experience within the public education system, there have been positive, meaningful, and memorable moments that ultimately helped to define who I have chosen to be.

My first elementary Principal was kind and gentle with us as students, yet had high expectations about conduct. In later years, I realized how much work they did to help build a strong sense of community within our school, especially with the parents and staff. As young children, what we saw was a kind adult who also took school expectations seriously; unbeknownst to us, they were also intentionally working on building a positive sense of community and capacity within the parent community. Decades later, that group of parents – most of whom are now in their eighties – is still tightly connected as a friend group. I give credit to the work of that Principal in the 1970s for making those connections happen.

I certainly never thought at the age of five – or even 15 – that the Principals and Vice-Principals at my school would have an impact on my future self, or that I would learn some major life lessons from them. It never crossed my mind at the time that some of the teachers in my high school would later become my colleagues, as both teachers and school administrators.

I fondly remember my days as a teacher candidate ('student teacher', in those days), and it has been the 'outside the classroom' experiences that linger. I couldn't predict that the experiences, challenges, and professional connections of those early years would have shaped the professional choices and opportunities awaiting me in the decades to follow.

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I had the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with a school Principal while helping chaperone an international school trip. That Principal actively included me in high-level decision-making processes related to some tricky situations with student conduct and medical emergencies, and this was incredibly meaningful and empowering. I was treated as a respected and valued colleague whose ideas and leadership mattered. I felt like part of a team. The small act of including me – of seeking my input and putting trust in me, when they could easily have made a decision alone – meant that as a team we found the best possible outcome for the student, and gave me a sense of being included as part of a collaborative team. Years later, I was able to express my gratitude.

As a teacher, I had the privilege of working with several different Principals at various schools. Not surprisingly, I experienced a variety of leadership styles, and learned something different from each administrator. At first, it never crossed my mind as a teacher that I would have an interest in (or even the skillset to) move into administration. My focus was on my students, on sponsoring extra-curricular activities, on committee work with my colleagues, and on being a local union rep for our school.

As a fairly new teacher, I remember my Principal supporting me in dealing with a parent who was not happy with my assessment practice. It was a challenging time for me, and I recall with gratitude the time the Principal took to ask me some tough open-ended questions and guide me through my

thinking. While I felt supported, I also learned a lot about my own practice and philosophy. Years later, I realized that the Principal was taking the time to coach me, and for that I will always be grateful. It was a moment when I shifted to being true to my own beliefs as an educator, rather than simply following someone else's formula. It was a moment when I sharpened my sense of empathy for the diversity of families, and developed my courage and confidence to have difficult conversations. It was a catalyst for me in trying to ensure I always looked at things from each party's perspective before finalizing decisions. And it was the realization that taking the time to have coaching conversations – and not just 'telling' – can be immensely powerful, and can help the other person find their own sense of personal success.

As a more experienced teacher, I had the privilege of working with a highly skilled Principal. This was a leader who respectfully challenged my teacher colleagues and me, nudged us to ensure we were aware of best practices in teaching, and ensured that we had the required supports to put those practices into action. I remember watching with admiration and appreciation as they respectfully advocated to the

district for the needs of vulnerable students and the whole school community. From them, I learned more about the inner workings of the district, and about best practices for students with diverse learning needs. They shared about the local Principals' and Vice-Principals' association and took the time to invite me to district-level professional development sessions. And then one day, when they needed to be away for a few days, they asked if I would be willing to step in for them. They mentioned that it would be a good opportunity for me to see if administration was of interest. I will forever be grateful for their belief that nudged me into a role I had not considered.

As a Vice-Principal, I was fortunate to work with Principals with a variety of leadership styles. Some leadership styles were similar to mine, and some were very different. While it can be easy to become frustrated by a style and philosophy that is different than our own, I found in those experiences an opportunity to learn the most about *my own* preferred practice and philosophy. I challenged myself to reflect, and use scenarios as case studies. What might I do if I were the Principal? What might I do differently? What factors would I consider? The richest moments



were when the Principal encouraged and welcomed a collaborative and vulnerable team discussion, so that we could learn from each other. I have the highest respect for each of the Principals I worked with as Vice-Principal, and I learned a great deal from each of them.

What stands out in my time as a Vice-Principal were those meaningful moments when my Principals took intentional time out of very busy work schedules to coach me, to give critical feedback, and to express their belief in me.

When I moved into the role of a Principal, I came to better understand and highly respect the work of our district BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA) colleagues: the Superintendents, Assistant/Deputy Superintendents and Directors of Instruction who lead and support the districts. It was humbling when those colleagues took time with me to provide critical feedback on my professional growth plans, and to encourage and persuade me at times when I might not have had the confidence or belief in myself. As a district leader, my understanding and respect further deepened, and at the same time I was humbled to support and learn from Principals and Vice-Principals across the district.

I have learned that many professional connections are long-lasting, even though we may not expect them to be. They help shape who we are, and I am grateful for each one. I have to come to learn that it is often the unexpected connections that become a true gift in our professional life.

Some personal examples of unexpected 'professional reconnections and interconnections' include:

- One of my teachers when I was a student was later a highly-respected colleague as an administrator.
- A Principal who encouraged me to go into administration was later a Principal that I supported from a district role, and then we were colleagues in the district.

- A Vice-Principal colleague – and also the child of one my Principals when I was a student – later became a valued district colleague and a well-respected BCSSA colleague from whom I have learned a great deal.

It is likely that most of us have similar examples from our own educational leadership journey. These interconnections are powerful, and an example of the richness of our public education system. When we discover them, and learn from them, it is a true gift.

As a student, teacher-candidate, teacher, Vice-Principal, Principal, and district leader in the BC public education system, I am extremely proud of the work and dedication of our Principals, Vice-Principals, and district leaders. Collectively, the time each of these people puts into supporting the community is powerful, and ultimately serves to improve the success of the students within our care. It also builds the capacity and environment of success for the staff that they support.

We all know that these roles are becoming more and more complex. And yet, the time taken by these leaders to support those within their care can be life-changing and empowering. You never know when a small moment or conversation will end up as a catalyst or defining moment for another person.

When a Principal, Vice-Principal or district leader retires, they will have likely impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people in their school communities. I have come to realize that every professional connection matters, no matter how slender it may seem at the time. These connections shape who we are, and make us our best possible professional selves.

To all of you in these roles, and on behalf of everyone you support in your school and district communities, a heartfelt thank you. Although you may not realize it in the moment, our work makes a life-changing difference to the students, staff, parents, and community members you serve.

Every connection you make matters.