





by **Wendy Yu, Sharon McKay, Pam Becker, Leann Buteau,
Laurie Sviatko, Kim Cuellar, Elspeth Anjos, Cheryl Lloyd**
SD 43 (Coquitlam)

WENDY

For a few years now, I have been part of an informal professional book club comprised of some amazing, strong women. Each year, we choose a book and meet every month to discuss it, with a new person facilitating the monthly meeting. The membership shifts a little here and there, but I always gain something from every person there.

Our little book club is made up of female administrators at all levels, including retired administrators. We all love to read, have a thirst for knowledge, and believe in holding each other up. While I joined the book club thinking it would provide great intellectual and professional learning, I never knew the heights to which it would lift me up emotionally and spiritually, and offer such a strong sense of camaraderie. This is what this group of women has given me:

1. These women are **understanding**. They understand me. And I understand them. We have walked similar paths; we have fought similar battles.
2. These women are **compassionate**. Although not all are mothers, they have the hearts of mothers, those hearts that give you their all, but expand even further to include the woman beside you.
3. These women are **authentic**. They are unapologetic about who they are and the values they hold. They are steadfast in their beliefs, but are always open to new thoughts, ideas, and perspectives.

I believe that this book club has made me a more understanding, compassionate, and authentic leader, not just with my staff, students, and families, but with myself. I am grateful to have these women

as part of my journey, and I highly recommend starting your own club!

Here are some books we have read so far:

Onward by Elena Aguilar

The Art of Coaching Teams by Elena Aguilar

Cassandra Speaks by Elizabeth Lesser

Critical Hope by Kari Grain

Women and Leadership by Julia Gillard & Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

SHARON

I had always been intrigued when I heard about friends in a book club. It sounded fun, getting together with friends, and sharing a glass of wine and a variety of perspectives on a chosen book. I had never joined a book club until the opportunity arose with some administrative colleagues. I had a feeling I would love it, but I didn't know that it would change how I felt about myself as an educational leader, and how close I would become to the women who support me.

Listening to my colleagues' different perspectives on a whole range of topics is amazing but, more specifically, I can listen and learn from female colleagues who are experiencing the same kinds of challenges in their daily lives, both at home and at work. I have come to know and respect this group of women in my book club, and they have made me a better person and a better leader. They have given me the confidence to continue to strive to do my very best daily, to work at my school, and to communicate with my staff, students, and my parent community. We have examined many topics such as coaching teams, women in leadership, and gender bias. My joy of reading has increased.

I know I can always improve my learning, but having a group of women educators to support me in that journey is a gift that I will treasure for the remainder of my career. The laughter – and the idea that sometimes we may take ourselves too seriously – is welcome, as we meet and put both our jobs and our roles into perspective. We have important and stressful roles as leaders in our buildings; the laughter that we share, and our ability to communicate on a common topic, are welcome interactions to look forward to every month.

"MY JOY OF READING HAS INCREASED."



For school administrators, the days are so busy and full that a focus on our own professional development can sometimes end up on the back burner. It can be equally challenging to find dedicated time to connect with our colleagues, and to engage in conversations that matter. This book club emerged from a need to connect, to engage in professional conversations about topics of importance to the group, and to learn and grow with a cohort of diverse individuals.

When the COVID pandemic hit, and our worlds – both professionally and personally – became unrecognizable, this book club was a lifeline. When we could not meet in person, we met monthly on Zoom to talk about our book, and about our role as administrators during that very challenging time. The book club filled some of the vital need for community that many of us were missing deeply. As caregivers

to our communities, it was time to focus on ourselves for a couple of precious hours each month.

Over the years, our professional lives have evolved and changed, just like the book we democratically select each year. This year, our book centres on the lives and lessons of women in prominent leadership roles. What has stayed the same, many books later, is our commitment to each other and ourselves, to our own professional growth, and to the gift of community that has developed as a result.



New to a school district and near the end of my educational career, I wanted to find a way to connect with other female leaders to help ground myself in my new district. It was important to me to begin building strong relationships, to foster my own learning, and to learn about the culture of the school district. As a female leader, it was also important to me to learn alongside those with similar lived experiences, and to have a place where I could share openly.

In chatting with a colleague (I had transitioned into her former role), I discovered that she had such connections, and they invited me into their sacred spaces. I am forever grateful for that invitation. Within the first few meetings, I found myself creating relationships with people whose paths I may never have crossed, yet who had very similar narratives as we journeyed through this career as female leaders. We have gotten to know each other on such a professional and personal level that I value everything about these women, trust them with my successes, and seek support when I struggle.

This book club has been soothing for my soul. Lived experiences in my previous district left me seeking those that valued my work, and I have now found that understanding. I am returning to the learner I

always valued being. The discussions we have had, through the variety of books we have read over the last few years, have re-sparked my personal growth, and helped me to understand the past and move forward with excitement, even in the twilight of my career.

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The offer came... And then, the excitement, apprehension, and nervousness. Thank goodness I said yes, and joined a professional book club of amazing colleagues. Of course, I expected to learn from the authors of the books in each round, but I was also happy to receive the following gifts:

Community. The book club gives us something to unpack together – if I am not grasping the connection to my work, life, or role, then I know someone else in the book club is going to speak from a different lens, and I will gain a better understanding through their reflection. Every book club meeting furthered my learning about the topic itself, and about myself as an educational leader.

Wisdom. We never just talk about ‘the book’. A circle of women is bursting with shared insight and experience, which spontaneously sparks rich conversation on a myriad of topics. Before and after our dedicated ‘book conversation’, we exchange the highs and lows of our personal

and professional lives, meeting celebration and support when needed.

Accountability. I am a curious professional who enjoys reading and learning. I am also the Principal of an elementary school that requires a lot of energy, as well as a constant cycle of reflection and action to keep us moving in the right direction to achieve our goals. To be honest, if there was not a deadline for each chapter, and a set date and time to meet and discuss together, I would not be reading the books.

Inspiration. I am inspired to do more by being in a book club that is comprised of some of the most dedicated, intelligent, and personable women leaders I know. My respect for these women pushes me to come to the meetings prepared and ready to listen and share. I come away from each meeting with new perspectives that can be applied to situations, suggestions for next steps, and sometimes validation for those difficult decisions made in isolation in my building.



Being an educational administrator often means navigating a challenging path of responsibilities, decisions, and leadership. By participating in a women’s professional book club, I’ve discovered that personal growth and a sense of community are invaluable, and it has become an essential part of my professional life.

This professional women’s book club serves as a sanctuary where I can freely share my thoughts and ideas. It’s a supportive community where I’ve had the privilege to broaden my perspectives through rich

discussions with women from diverse backgrounds. These women have become an invaluable support group where I seek guidance and inspiration. We connect over shared experiences and unique challenges as women in leadership positions, and our discussions often translate into tangible actions that have enhanced and strengthened my leadership role.

Beyond the intellectual growth, the book club has also played an important role in my self-care. With my busy schedule, it encourages me to prioritize my personal growth and well-being. This group of women have formed a sisterhood where we come together to uplift and empower each other by hashing out ideas, sharing challenges, and celebrating our successes. In addition, I was lucky enough to connect to a group of women whose keen sense of humour has brought much laughter to our conversations.

This professional women's book club is a space where I have found a sense of belonging that extends and transcends the pages of the books we read.

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Learning is always more fun with others. Throughout my career as an educator, I sought opportunities to learn with others. I reached out and joined

professional learning networks and action research groups, and when, as a leader, my time became even more limited, I settled on a book club as it filled numerous needs. Our book club selects a professional book each year, and we meet each month to discuss a chapter. We take turns crafting questions or discussion prompts, and we meet in restaurants and homes, on outdoor decks and, of course, via Zoom.

First and foremost, the book club offers camaraderie. Being the only administrator in a building has its lonely moments, and having a group who share the job – if not the community – is a welcome balm for the soul. It is a healthy release to meet each month and have a place to laugh, ask questions, seek resources, and commiserate. Our group has become a sounding board for ideas, a place to share solutions, and a place to receive and offer support. We celebrate the triumphs within the group, and console the tragedies.

I have always wanted to grow and learn, yet time can become so precious that my own professional reading and learning can be pushed further down my lengthy 'to-do' list. The book club provides accountability to keep me doing what I want to do. The chapter-a-month model is neither onerous nor daunting and, by the end of the year, we have read a worthy book. The model also allows for a deep dive into the books we have read. If I was reading the book by myself, I would not take as much time, or consider the ideas, strategies, and theses as deeply. I suspect that the ideas in the book would not come to be woven into my practice in as meaningful a way. It is the slow, deep reading and discussion that allows the concepts to go beyond ideas, and to be put into action.

In order to select our book each year, we each offer up suggestions and then we vote. Sometimes we select a book that I would not have chosen. This is such a gift, as it opens me to new possibilities. There has never been a selection that has not been worthy of our time, although I might not have recognized

that at the start. Our discussions also open me to other viewpoints about the same material, or to other ways to put the ideas into practice. Being part of the book club challenges me to remain open-minded and critical. It provides new insights and alternatives.

To meet each month with a group of friends, to laugh, to be part of a support network, and to expand our thinking together has enriched me as a school leader. I am now retired, and the bonds of the group continue to draw me in to read and learn, to support and celebrate, to be part of a collective of amazing school leaders. I am looking forward to our book for this year, and all the discussions that will follow.

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I am a librarian's daughter, and I have been reading and talking about books since I began teething. However, this is the first and only book club I have ever been a part of where we *actually* read the book, prepare our answers, and learn from each

other. It is a professional learning community, through and through. But that does not mean that it is not full of belly laughs, thoughtful gifts, and music recommendations.

We choose our books in a democratic way and take turns leading the conversation each month. Our book club members are a varied group – various ages, marital and family status, different races. Some are Principals, or Vice-Principals, some now retired, some are at elementary schools, secondary schools, and district positions. This diversity sets off multiple perspectives in our conversations.

We didn't all know each other well when we began; we have used literature to connect, creating solid partnerships through ideas and shared values. We have a foundation of respect and support, which underpins *all* of our discussions. This book club has helped me to find a safe place to be vulnerable, to learn so many things from these amazing women, and to create professional and personal connections that help me grow at my school and within the district. I have never left a book club meeting without being introduced to a new idea or perspective, hearing a thought provoking statement, or just realizing that I am not alone on this educational journey. These women understand me, from my professional challenges to my personal balance of family and work. Using the literature as a third point, we are able to be both introspective and interpretative, to listen and share and to grow as leaders through a network of support.

