



FROM SURVIVING To THRIVING

A REFLECTION ON PANDEMIC PRINCIPALSHIP, BUILDING SCHOOL TEAMS, AND TEACHER AGENCY

"I am thankful for the stories I have from my parents, and I share them with my school community and my own children. I hope the stories will help direct them, so that they know where they came from, and see where they want to go."

- Jacqueline Taylor

I survived COVID-19 as the Principal of Silver Star Elementary.

In the early days of 2019, my goal as the school's new Principal was to refresh the narrative for the Silver Star community. I spent dedicated time with the staff rep to get up to speed on the school, as I was aware that this staff had experienced a rotation of new administration each year. As the voices of staff offered insights into the school context, I also

by

Jacqueline Taylor

Principal, SD 22 (Vernon)

recognized that leadership was needed to support many new assessment practices and initiatives. Change requires the laying of groundwork to build trust and open communication, and Silver Star was not unlike many schools where serving the changing and diverse needs of learners and families can be challenging. I saw an opportunity to rebuild a narrative that would help staff to feel valued and heard. I wanted to make this a success story.

As I was in my first year at the school and still building relationships, I made myself available for everyone. I started by being open and honest when telling my own stories and introducing my leadership, and was warmed to learn the stories of Silver Star and my new teammates.

The first TELP (Transformative Educational Leadership Program, UBC) article I ever read was “Storywork Pedagogy” by Jo-Ann Archibald¹. This article expanded my thoughts about leadership and led me to think more deeply about who I am and where I came from. It helped me to dissect my leadership style as, in the words of one of our guest speakers, Dr. Bly Frank, “you must listen to the stories they (students, staff and parents) are telling you and the culture you are developing.”

That year, mindful of the power of story, I launched two book clubs: *The Book Whisperer* by Donalyn Miller², and *Inquiry Mindset* by Trevor MacKenzie³. As the groups met monthly, dialogue opened among staff, strategies were shared, and arrangements made to co-plan and team teach. I felt like the new team was breaking ground.

As Christmas approached, the waters felt even calmer. Staff were coming to me with their questions, ideas,

and frustrations. There had been many changes in practices, and in expectations on different fronts, but we were beginning to navigate the changes through building relationships, communication, and – above all – trust.

Then, all of a sudden, COVID-19 was upon us.

We were instantly separated, yet – in retrospect – the most ironic thing happened. We all grew closer.

When COVID first emerged, it was a confusing time. Many educators were experiencing stress, trying to navigate a new kind of teaching with the threat of the virus all around them. I supported their strengths, offered positive support, and encouraged them to continue to explore new strategies that would best work in this very difficult time in education. With every passing story and interaction, there flowed kindness and compassion that developed into strong relationships and open communication, and this bolstered our team through 2020 and 2021.

When we returned to school in September, we were all separated in cohorts, with just one other teacher or class. While these were tough and lonely times for teachers, families, and staff, the Silver Star staff were amazing. We continued to meet on TEAMS, and we even had socials online. We all grew very close and worked as a team.

When we thought things were approaching normal, January 2022 arrived with a bang – and a *crash*, a *push*, and a *smash*! The rise of Omicron was a shock, and created a heightened fear: would there be enough teachers, Education Assistants (EAs), students? What would a ‘functional closure’ mean for our school?

January and February 2022 were the most challenging months of my career as a Principal. As we dealt with this serious wave of the virus, a great number of staff – and students – were absent, and we had to contemplate how learning could continue with so many missing. We had been working towards building a long-term vision, action plans, and goal

1 Archibald Q'um Q'um Xi'em, J.-ann (2023) “Indigenous storywork for Education and research,” *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Fourth Edition), pp. 189–197. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-818630-5.06016-4>.

2 Miller, D. and Anderson, J. (2011) *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

3 MACKENZIE, T.R.E.V.O.R. (2021) *Inquiry mindset; scaffolding a Partnership for Equity and agency in learning*. S.I.: ELEVATE BOOKS EDU.

"As we dealt with this serious wave of the virus, a great number of staff – and students – were absent, and we had to contemplate how learning could continue with so many missing."

setting, but needed to balance that with managing the challenges of day-to-day operations. Our team was poised to start penning the Silver Star story, but was this the appropriate time? The words of Tony McKay kept running through my head: "We shouldn't be doing things to people, but with people".

At our next collaboration meeting, I took a page from a TELP session and recognized that our next step was to share our gifts. I believe that leading from your core values makes you who you are as a leader, and focusing on the gifts we have gained from our families, colleagues and those that are important to us helped us all to dig deep for our own core values, and helped us to uncover what has shaped us and who we are as teachers. Discovering those values has brought us to the next step of writing our story, as a community, here at Silver Star.

As a team, we took the time to deepen our thoughts and collect street data on what we see for our learners, and to examine where they are and where they are going. We have started to measure the value of our system by the networks within them. Together we established shared values and a vision which led to more empowerment for the teachers, and filtered on to our students who need encouragement and support. These stories are like a book that needs to be opened and shared; these stories are never-ending as we continue to learn and grow.

We are moving forward, working on our school goals and developing our action plan. The learning

from TELP sessions and *Spirals Playbook*⁴ inspired the process we used to develop our school plan. Our staff has been presented with data from the province and district, and now we examine our own individual data. This has opened the door to curiosity, and has allowed us to pinpoint areas of growth and to highlight areas of success. I am striving to heighten everyone's responsibility for our learners; in Tony McKay's words, "We have to have a learning system that is productive." This is our shared responsibility, as we build a collaborative culture of learning for both staff and students. Our next step is to create the action plan that will support our vision and values for the next three years.

From the many great readings, riveting presentations, and discussions from this year's learning opportunities, I have been defining what supports me in building leadership with my teammates. This quote by Shane Safir has inspired me:

"The purpose of leadership is to listen, inspire, hold space for others to make meaning, model excellent pedagogy, and build a culture of transformation. It is about slowing down, really seeing and hearing people and moving with humility and integrity."

I want to do exactly this, and to hold space for others to make meaning. I have been setting the stage for next steps in planning for impact and will use the *Spirals Playbook* to help unfold what makes our school a

4 <https://c21canada.org/playbook/>

"Our network groups have enabled teachers with like passions to get together and have meaningful conversations about a topic of interest. I appreciate the time we are given to put our plans into action."

- Ali Thompson, Silver Star Elementary



Fern Imrich and Ali Thompson
Silver Star Elementary

learning organization. There will always be stumbling blocks. I know from the University of Victoria's Catherine McGregor that, "the pathway is not always linear." Her comment about Tempered Radicals – people who want to succeed in their organizations yet want to live by their values – made things clearer for me. We can all feel that we are being pulled in two directions, and engaging in networking both as a district leadership team and as a staff has proved powerful from a learning perspective.

At Silver Star, we have been working towards a consistent shared moral purpose by sharing our individual values and gifts, and this is how teachers can become more deeply engaged in the learning. We have been defining our Silver Star purpose by exploring the value of our teachers as a community of learners. Leading innovation is about collaboration with staff who have very different perspectives, and this leads us to support all student learners. Our team is now starting to better understand how relationships are key to helping students learn. Our next steps are a collective practice, as we create pathways from our

life experiences and build networks within the staff.

This quote from Jana Fox inspired me: "My background story helps me every day with how I lead." Listening to the stories of my staff, students, and parents has helped me to shape and create a space in our school

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"Trusting teachers as professionals to know where their interests and passions for growing as professionals lie is the most respectful and collaborative approach to accessing this in order to contribute to growing a school community and support student learning. Often, all the knowledge we need is in the room, and when teachers combine this knowledge through interest based collaborative groups it creates

ownership and shared leadership. No one person is directing what or how the learning is occurring, but rather time and space is provided for teachers to meet. The area of interest often becomes embedded in teaching practice and, much like an inquiry approach, evidence and data sources (whether quantitative or qualitative) are revealed through the daily workings of a classroom or a school as a whole."

Robyn Ladner, Silver Star Elementary



Kate Morrison, Joanne Lockhart, Maria Snider, & Brittney Meyer
Silver Star Elementary

community where we can share our stories and trust. Our team is starting to take risks both in telling our stories and asking for support in learning. As I model holding space for my staff, I see how they are working to build connections, and to really listen to the stories of our students.

After a year of TELP, I felt ready to lead for impact. Stepping into the 2022 new school year, I was ready to present my ideas of 'Teacher Agency: Voice and Choice'.

In consultation with Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser, and after reading their new book, *Leading Through Spirals of Inquiry For Equity and Quality*, I introduced a new format for our teacher professional learning meetings. My new Vice-Principal, fresh out of the classroom, was supportive, and ready to assist with this new challenge.

As the Principal who usually leads the meetings, I was nervous about the idea of giving up control in a new meeting format, but I knew the key was to be vulnerable. I explained to the staff that I was scared to introduce my new idea for 'Teacher Agency'. I outlined my fears: I was fearful that the idea would not work, and fearful that they would find the idea too 'airy fairy'. I was fearful that I would not get buy-in, and that my idea for a new structure would flop. By speaking to them, I faced those fears.

After reviewing our journey of the past year in developing our Silver Star story, we asked all of the teachers to write down two areas of interest where they would like to spend quality time collaborating with their colleagues.

We sorted the topics and found six themes: Numeracy, Indigenous Education, Assessment, Technology, Outdoor Learning, and Community Connections.

Following the Spirals process, we presented each group with questions from the scanning chapter in our first meeting. Teachers were engaged in deep discussion about what was going on for our students, and what we could do to support student learning.

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We had scheduled only 30 minutes for the second meeting, and I received feedback that they would like more time for the next meeting. The Pro-D chair received a request from the committee to use part of our school-based Pro-D Day to meet in our interest-based collaborative groups. This felt like success.

As our groups continue to meet, TTOC (Teachers Teaching On Call) times have been offered to help support Teacher Agency. Our Primary Team has jumped on board to learn about evidence informed literacy practices. This has created a sense of teacher agency where teachers are fully engaged in improving practices, alongside our network collaborative learning groups where teachers are sharing ideas of what we can do, and how we can change our practice to support student success. Several of our team have signed up for a residency where our district support teachers work with the teacher at the school to support the learning and growth of our students. Silver Star is becoming a true learning community that supports teacher agency to ultimately support student success.

As I had hoped, we are writing the story of Silver Star Elementary as a team. Teachers have agency in their learning and are making great gains as to how they work together to support student learning. The team is aligned like never before. I am grateful for the opportunity to lead and support the staff, and I am thankful for my colleagues for the consultation and brainstorming, and for the District staff for their support, knowledge, and encouragement. I am very excited about our accomplishments, and our direction. We are thriving.