

# **Conditions that Support the Creation and Enactment of Shared School Vision**

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## **Abstract**

In this study, the researchers examined the conditions under which a school can create and enact effective shared vision. A method of triangulation was used to find schools that identified as having strong shared vision, and that were open to discussing their conditions. Two focus groups were interviewed, and commonalities in underlying conditions were identified through keyword searches and a thematic analysis. Both schools revealed common themes that were categorized as Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Collaboration and Values. The researchers also noted the interplay between formal and informal leadership rather than a top-down or bottom up approach to creating and enacting vision. The researchers concluded that recreating the ideal conditions does not ensure effective vision, it simply sets the scene for success if pursued.

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## **Introduction**

This introductory chapter provides a discussion of the research question and situates the reader in the context in which the research is explored. The importance of the study is examined, assumptions and biases are declared, and a description of how the report is organized is provided.

## **Research Question**

This research took place in the broader context of leadership, and included both formal and informal leadership in schools, and the interplay between the two. Specifically, the researchers were asking *what conditions support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision?* Vision is a complex and living concept that helps a school staff identify needs and goals, and provides a plan to move forward. Effective shared school vision is a more comprehensive concept than a business model mission statement that focuses on directives or outcomes. It is also more than a collection of sentences in a document, or a stencil on a wall. “At the broadest level, vision is about moral purpose and possibilities... concepts forged from values and beliefs that define the instructional program and shape the school climate in ways that enhance student learning” (Murphy & Torre, 2015, p. 178). Shared school vision is embraced and lived by the stakeholders in the school community, and is embedded in the daily life of the school.

What conditions are required for the creation and enactment of effective school vision? How do schools with effective shared visions arrive at them and how does school vision become embedded in a school’s day-to-day life? Does it come primarily from formal leadership, informal leadership, or a combination thereof? Of interest to the researchers are the processes and the people who are involved in creating school vision and the conditions under which shared vision flourishes.

## **Context**

In terms of place, the context of this research is within two elementary schools in British Columbia that are recognized to have effective shared vision. School names and all people referred to have been changed to pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Both schools teach students from Kindergarten

to Grade Seven. Lakeview has about 40 teaching staff and approximately 500 students while Forest Hill has about 20 teaching staff and approximately 200 students. The researchers employed a triangulation method in order to find a strong research sample. The three points of agreement came from senior staff, administrators and the teaching staff. The goal was to interview the staff in order to identify the conditions that support the shared vision. Schools that participated in these interviews were suggested to the researchers by senior management as appropriate for research on shared vision, which in turn was corroborated by the administrators of the schools. Staff members participated in a survey designed to show whether teachers also agreed that their school has effective shared vision. Interviews were therefore in schools where senior staff, administrators and teaching staff all agreed that the school had effective shared vision.

In terms of a theoretical context, the researchers recognize that shared school vision is strongly linked to leadership. “Few concepts are more noted in the leadership effects research than vision. It is a cardinal element in the school improvement equation as well”, (Murphy & Torre, 2015, p. 177) and results in students’ achievement. School vision is inextricably linked to leadership since leaders are responsible for framing the vision, creating the conditions for its development and supporting the culture that sustains it. “Studies over the last two decades have confirmed that in improvement work, vision-related activity is the most powerful tool that principals possess”, (Murphy and Torre, 2015, p. 177). Leadership, however, is not limited to positional authority. Leadership can be shared and distributed throughout a school community, and extend far beyond formal roles. Given the varied possibilities for leadership roles in a school, the researchers did not assume that the principal was the architect of school vision, or that school vision had been developed in a top-down manner. “There is a relatively strong connection between the work of principals in framing, not imposing, mission, goals, and expectations of school effectiveness” (Murphy & Torre, 2015, p. 177). It is also possible that school vision may also be born out of grassroots needs, and fueled by a dedicated group of informal leaders.

Effective shared vision, by its very definition of being shared, requires commitment and dedication from the school staff. The engagement of a staff is not likely to be achieved through hierarchical, authoritative leadership, but rather from the creative tension that is generated when needs are identified, and a way forward is elucidated. “Effective leadership from the entire school community is needed to implement shared visions and values” (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 1). Since teachers and support staff are working most closely with the students, they are in key positions to identify the needs of their population. Teacher leaders may be appropriately positioned

and extremely motivated to articulate the needs of the school and to find ways to meet those needs. This momentum may be a large factor in creating the conditions that lead to the enactment of a shared school vision. It is in this manner that the interplay between formal and informal leadership becomes of interest when considering the theoretical context of effective shared vision.

## **Importance of Study**

When it comes to education, the importance of a topic can find no greater resting place than its positive effect on students. Hence, the literature that links student achievement and shared vision is of primary relevance. Huffman and Hipp (2000) state that, regarding “shared values and vision, it becomes readily apparent in school organizations that if you don’t have a vision, it is impossible to develop effective policies, procedures, and strategies targeted toward a future goal” (p. 6). From their research of 25,000 pieces of coded information, based on 35 years of literature on vision, Murphy and Torre (2014) tell us that “(s)chool success and ‘vision for learning’ ... are empirically linked” (p.177).

A well-developed vision is of great importance to the members of a school, and also to the community, as it is often touted as being key to positive change and to influencing student achievement (Huffman, 2001; Korkmaz, 2006; Kurland, Peretz & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010; Sheppard, Hurley & Dibbon, 2010). Although it is not the intention of this research to examine student achievement, it is the reason why vision is important to the researchers. As educators, there is no greater goal than to support student growth. Knowing that effective vision is linked to student learning is a powerful motivator to learn more about vision, and the researchers trust that others will find the results of this research of value for the same reason.

Formal leaders within a school or district are likely to find this study of importance as it endeavors to describe leadership practices that are supportive of effective shared vision. “Leadership, vision and organizational learning are considered to be the key to school improvement” (Kurland, et al., 2010, p. 7). Transformational leaders have the greatest success in creating the optimal conditions needed for collaboration and empowerment of staff. “The transformational leadership model is more consistent with trends in educational reform such as teacher empowerment, distributed leadership and organizational learning” (Kurland et al, 2010, p. 12).

While research suggests that transformational leaders will be found in schools with effective vision, it is also important to consider the kind of teacher-leaders who are present in this environment and the relationship between these formal and informal leaders. Thus, this research will also be of interest to teachers in informal leadership positions who work collaboratively with both staff and administration to create positive change. These teachers will benefit from learning more about how the relationships and interactions that contribute to effective vision are built and sustained. Learning more about the creation and enactment of school vision would be of value to the entire educational community.

## **Assumptions and Declarations**

The two researchers on this project have a wide variety of experiences as educators and came with biases as a result of working with different administrators and teachers under different conditions. Among these biases was the expectation of finding transformational leaders at the helm of schools with effective shared vision. The researchers also expected to find these transformational leaders working with passionate, dedicated teachers with strongly bonded relationships. It was anticipated that the interviewed staff would be working in an environment that supported creative tension and mutual respect.

For the purposes of this research, the researchers have used a description of vision provided by Sheppard et al (2010) as a foundation and reference point to guide and conceptualize vision. It states, “The school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practices” (p. 14). The three pillars alluded to in this definition are: collaboration, a clear plan, and influence on classroom practices. These pillars have been used to help identify schools with effective shared vision, and have provided focus for this inquiry.

## **Organization of the Report**

The remainder of this report is comprised of four major sections: Literature Review, Research Methods, Results, and Discussion, plus References and Appendices.

This introductory chapter has considered the context of the research question. It asks, what are the conditions that support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision? The importance of



the study lies in the link between vision and student achievement. Although the entire school community would likely find this research to be of interest, it may be of particular value to formal and informal leaders who wish to support the conditions that lead to effective shared vision.

The Literature Review incorporates the work from 14 different studies ranging in topics from transformative leadership, school vision, teacher collaboration, workplace satisfaction, distributed leadership, and representation of values. Within these studies, the researchers were looking for conditions that could be linked to effective school vision.

In the Research Methods Section, the researchers describe the procedure used to identify schools with effective school vision. Through this process, schools were narrowed down to become part of the focus group interviews.

The Results portion of this paper describes the strategies used to extract information from the interviews through the analysis of keywords and themes.

In the Discussion, the researchers compare findings to expectations based on the literature review. This section is broken down into five subsections: Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Collaboration, Values, and Unexpected and Additional Findings. Recommendations and Further Research Questions are also presented.

## **Literature Review**

This review of the literature on vision has been organized according to the prominent themes that emerged. In the 14 studies that were examined, the researchers found that Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Collaboration, and Values were themes commonly found in the literature on vision.

## **Introduction**

An effective shared school vision is one that guides the decisions and actions in a school. It is far more than the articulation of a vision that is important. Effective shared vision is an ongoing process; a process that is developed, enacted and sustained, and this holistic view of vision is echoed in the literature on vision. Vision is described as an embedded concept, woven into the fabric of the school culture and expressed through the relationships between the schools'

stakeholders (Huffman, 2001; Huffman & Hipp 2000; Korkmaz, 2006; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Sheppard et al., 2010). This is unsurprising as vision cannot hope to have a positive effect on schools if it is only articulated, and not lived.

Murphy and Torre (2014) provide a pivotal study in this literature review on school vision. It is a self-proclaimed exhaustive, integrative review that combines 35 years of qualitative and quantitative research findings on classic as well as education literature regarding vision. The authors aim to provide scaffolding or “intellectual architecture” (p. 177) on a topic they describe as “somewhat ethereal” (p.177). They write that “dealing with vision is a bit like trying to carry fog around in a satchel” (p.177) and therefore seek to operationalize the concept with their narrative synthesis. They found that “almost all of the knowledge on vision is embedded”, and that to expand their understanding, they needed to turn to literature on school leadership and school improvement. Very broadly, they found that they could unpack vision into three dimensions: mission, which addresses values and purposes; goals, which provide direction; and expectations which provide specific targets. They found that all three were necessary to positively impact student achievement. Moreover, Murphy and Torre (2014) conclude that consensus building and communication are key to effective school vision (p. 181). Collaboration is essential and “leaders’ actions foster the commitment of others (and) nurture needed workplace trust” (p. 181). Given the scope of this exhaustive study, one of the things this inquiry will consider is whether mission, goals, and expectations were present in the schools studied.

## **Conditions that Support Effective Shared Vision**

In the general literature on school vision, there are conditions that emerge that support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision, and ultimately, the learning outcomes for students. Among these conditions are: transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaborative relationships, and an environment where the values of the stakeholders are represented (Fairman, & Mackenzie, 2014; Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010; Murphy & Torre, 2014). When the school has all of these conditions in place, effective shared vision is more likely to be created and enacted by the stakeholders.

## *Transformational Leadership*

Vision is a concept firmly embedded in the literature on leadership. Murphy & Torre, 2014, write that "leadership is the keystone element in developing, implementing, and shepherding the school's vision"(p. 183). When considering the prime conditions for setting and sustaining effective vision, the necessity of transformational and shared leadership are highlighted in the literature. Transformational leadership, as defined by Sheppard et al. (2010) includes leaders who are "visionary, change-oriented, goal oriented, intellectually stimulating, and who hold high expectations" (p. 14). Sun and Leithwood (2012) contend that transformational school leadership has a significant effect on student achievement. Kurland et al. (2010) identify that transformational leadership is the mediating effect in the development of school vision and school effectiveness. Transformational leaders provide opportunities that allow for success through organizational conditions (Thoonen et al., 2012). These organizational conditions include participative decisionmaking and teacher collaboration. Thoonen et al. (2012), based their research on the assumption that "leadership, school organizational conditions, teacher motivational factors, and teacher engagement in professional learning will improve teacher instructional practices, and in turn students' learning"(p. 445), all of which are affected by the principal and the vision of the school. In this particular study, the researchers measured school-wide capacity using several variables that are embedded in four general concepts:

(1) transformational leadership (i.e., vision building, individualized consideration and support, and intellectual stimulation); (2) school organizational conditions (i.e., participative decision-making and teacher collaboration); (3) teacher motivational factors (i.e., teachers' sense of self-efficacy and internalization of school goals into personal goals); and (4) teacher engagement in professional learning activities (i.e., keeping up to date, and experimenting and reflection) (p. 445).

Valentine and Prater (2011), who also recognize that transformational leadership was closely linked to student achievement in their study, identified areas where administrators were most effective. The principals with this style spend significant amounts of time building relationships and trust with their staff, which in turn, affects student achievement.

Inherent in this approach is the principal's belief that collective decision making is a stronger response to solving the larger, non-routine problems, while choosing to exercise managerial leadership skills to make routine decisions. This highlights the effective

principal's ability to work collaboratively with staff in group problem solving. Principals who are transformational spend a significant proportion of their time working collaboratively with staff to solve the key issues of school improvement. Transformational leaders invest significantly in the development of individuals, particularly teacher leaders. They build leadership capacity throughout the school and develop a culture of collaborative problem solving. They inspire through their personal efforts and their support and encouragement of others. Their daily behaviors communicate respect of others and expectations for success. Those observing the transformational leader see the fit between the leader, the collaborative decisions, and the school's vision. (p. 23)

While Bruggencate et al. (2012) did not find evidence in their study to support a direct positive effect of school leadership activities on student achievement, they did agree that "school leaders were found to have a strong influence on development orientation in school" (p. 699).

Transformational leaders support and sustain the conditions for a shared school vision through their ability to create a "working atmosphere which motivates and directs the people working in the organization as to the achievement of organizational aims and performance levels" (Korkmaz, 2006, p. 14). Transformational leaders build the conditions for trust and collaboration that are distinctly needed in order for a school vision to move from a top-down mandate to a shared vision of collectively espoused values. "Simply declaring a vision by a school leader and imposing it on the organization will not generate the collective energy needed to propel an organization forward. The central task of the leader is to build a vision including all participants in the organization" (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 6). A key way to build consensus in a staff is to acknowledge, employ and develop the leadership capacity of the staff, hence the importance of distributed leadership in the literature on vision.

### ***Distributed Leadership***

Distributed leadership is another condition that allows for growth and success when creating an educational community and an effective vision. Sheppard et al., (2010) describe distributed leadership as an approach in which there are formal and informal leaders. "Teachers are viewed as partners, rather than as followers, and leadership is defined through the interactions of leaders, constituents, and situation" (p. 2). The literature also shows that many teachers are leaders within their schools and either do not recognize or prefer to not acknowledge their influence (Weiner, 2011). Fairman and Mackenzie (2015), suggest a shift away from conventional notions of

leadership. They found that teachers, acting as catalysts for change, created situations where school community members were able to collaboratively build on each others' efforts to create the school vision. It is "through collective work, they learn how interdependent they are and work harder to be an effective collective" (p. 81). Sharing responsibility and success as a school community is an important part of empowering teachers to work together to create improved student achievement (Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Tubin, 2015). Anderson's research on reciprocal influences between teacher leaders and principals (2004), contends that teacher leadership can be more powerful than formal leadership. Moreover, he found that "teacher leaders influenced these schools to the point that the entire organization was transformed" (p. 111).

### ***Collaboration***

A frequent theme that emerges from the literature on vision is the importance of collaboration. One of the most interesting revelations in the literature on vision and leadership comes from a Canadian study by McKay, Morton and Rideout (2004). If one is to gain a greater understanding of whether vision is generated and sustained by formal, informal or combined leadership, their research serves as a beginning point. McKay et al note that the top-down approach of vision

development, favoured in the 1960s and 1970s, had little lasting effect in schools. “The bottom-up approach which followed fared not much better” (p.69) and had no readily apparent effect on student achievement. By the 1990s, many scholars were suggesting that the best school improvements would occur from “top-down, bottom-up approaches” (p. 69) where the larger system provides direction and support, while the key decisions are made and planning occurs collaboratively at the school level. It is thought that, within such a method, “visioning strategy ha(s) a better chance of embodying the shared visions that ar[i]se from the deeply held values of the stakeholders” (p. 69). Unfortunately, these authors feel that visioning strategy “is still predominantly a professionally oriented and relatively non-inclusive initiative” (McKay et al. 2004, p. 76).

Considering the research that points to the power of informal and distributed leadership, the researchers feel that further attention to the idea that effective vision is best suited to a “top-down, bottom-up approach” would be of benefit to the educational community. It is a view that harmonizes the importance of formal leadership and the importance of distributed, informal leadership. Understanding the relationship between the two may provide greater insight on how vision is created and enacted in a school organization.

### ***Values***

When revisiting the description of vision provided by Sheppard et al (2010), it is clear that staff commitment to a school vision is necessary to its effectiveness. It states, “the school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practices” (p. 14). Considerable influence on classroom practice is achieved through commitment, and the literature on vision suggests that commitment is achieved when the vision represents the values of the stakeholders (Senge, 1990; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; McKay, Morton, & Rideout (2004). Shared vision is built from personal visions, and personal vision is built upon the values and beliefs of the individual. “A prominent theme in the literature on visioning strategy... is the need for inclusion of personnel from many levels of the organization” (McKay, Morton, & Rideout, 2004). Senge reminds us that “people’s personal visions usually include dimensions that concern family, organization, community, and even the world” (p. 211). He stresses that “caring is *personal*. It is

rooted in an individual's own set of values, concerns, and aspirations. This is why genuine caring about a shared vision is rooted in personal visions" (p. 211). Huffman (2001) places great importance on collectively espoused values. She writes that, "It is critical to understand that the emergence of a strong, shared vision based on collective values provides the foundation for informed leadership, staff commitment, student success, and sustained school growth" (p. 1).

## **Summary**

The conditions that support effective shared vision that emerge from the literature are: transformational leadership, participative decision-making in the form of distributed leadership, and a collaborative environment where the values of all stakeholders are represented. Additionally, Murphy and Torre (2014) elucidate some of the specifics about vision in their attempt to operationalize this ephemeral concept. They contend that effective vision includes mission, goals, and expectations. More broadly, these could be expressed as values, a plan, and specific targets. With the goal of finding out about the conditions that support effective shared vision, the researchers have conducted a thematic analysis by coding the data according to themes that include transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaboration, and the represented values of the stakeholders. Additionally, this paper examines whether the shared visions at each of the schools interviewed include mission, goals and expectations, and what this may mean for our developing understanding of vision.

## **Research Methods**

In this section, the procedure used to identify schools with an effective school vision is explained. Through this process, schools were selected to become part of the focus group interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about the conditions that support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision.

## **Introduction**

What conditions support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision? Of primary interest is the interplay between formal and informal leadership in developing and sustaining school vision

because it is suspected that effective shared vision necessarily includes the collaboration of the stakeholders.

(S)imply declaring a vision by a school leader and imposing it on the organization will not generate the collective energy needed to propel an organization forward. The central task of the leader is to build a vision including all participants in the organization. Personal visions must be developed and shared so that a collective vision can be molded and embraced by all members (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 6).

This leads to further questions: Does effective vision spring from a grass roots level, inspired by the needs of the student population and stewarded by informal leadership? Can effective school vision be developed from a top-down mandate, framed and guided by formal leadership? If so, can it be firmly embraced by the teachers? Or perhaps effective school vision is developed, lived and sustained through an interplay of formal and informal leadership? By investigating schools with effective vision, the researchers hope to uncover the processes by which school leaders and staff arrive at a vision that “generates the collective energy needed to propel an organization forward” as stated above.

## **Methods**

This inquiry uses primarily qualitative methods, the main body of which is focus group interviews, followed by a thematic analysis. Quantitative research has only been used to find a sample of schools representative of effective shared vision. The researchers have used a survey and a triangulation method that has allowed the identification of schools that have strong vision. The heart of the research, however, has come from focus group interviews with the intent of deepening understanding of how effective visions that embrace the values of the stakeholders, are developed and sustained.

### ***Finding Schools with Effective Shared Vision***

The researchers sought out schools that have effective shared vision that guides decision making and daily practice. Multiple data sources were used to help establish validity of the research through triangulation. As a starting point, the researchers approached senior leadership in the \*\*\* School District through email to help identify elementary schools who they believed to have a



strong, shared vision, and/or who may have been inclined to participate in this research. In order to ensure clarity about what is meant by effective shared vision, the researchers used the following description for vision from Sheppard et al (2010): “The school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practices” (p. 14). This description of vision was included in the opening letter to senior district staff (Appendix A). The researchers received a list of ten elementary schools from this process.

The researchers recognize that identifying schools with effective vision cannot be reliably demonstrated by requesting the opinions of just members of senior staff. Snowball sampling was therefore used to help achieve triangulation and the nomination of the schools for this study was substantiated through a second source of data from the school administrators. Based upon the list of schools from senior staff, the researchers contacted the principals of these schools to solicit their opinions on two questions (see Appendix B).

The first question was whether the administrator felt his/her school reasonably met the description of effective school vision by Sheppard et al (2010), which provided the second data point in the triangulation. The second question was whether the administrator felt his/her staff would be interested in participating in this research through a survey. This question was only relevant if s/he agreed that his/her school fits the description of having effective shared vision. Four elementary school principals agreed that their school fit the definition from Sheppard et al (2010), as well as indicated that their staff members were interested in completing the survey.

The third data point in the quest for triangulation and validity came from the teachers themselves. The survey (Appendix C.2) was designed so that school staff could self-identify their school as having effective shared vision. The survey questions were developed to reflect the main points in the vision definition from Sheppard et al (2010): clear goals, collaboration, and impact on classroom practices. The surveys were sent to teachers at all the schools that: a) had been suggested by senior staff, b) had been recognized by the principal, and c) were schools that the principal felt were willing to participate in this research. The survey was eight questions in length and was based on a five-point Likert scale that asked teachers the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements related to school vision. The survey was designed in such a way that the extent of

agreement was linked to scores ranging from one to five. For example, “strongly disagree” is linked to a score of 1, a score of 3 is linked to “uncertain”, and a score of 5 is linked to “strongly agree.” If participants generally agreed that their school had effective vision, they necessarily achieved a total score above 50%. If participants generally disagreed that their school had effective vision, their score was necessarily below 50%.

The researchers accepted that a school met the requirements of demonstrating effective shared vision based on the following results:

- Triangulation was necessary. Senior staff, principals, and the teachers of the school of interest all agreed that the school possibly had effective vision.
- It was accepted that senior staff agreed that a particular school had effective vision if they nominated a school because they believed it may fit the description provided by Sheppard et al, 2010, "The school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practice."
- It was accepted that the principal of a nominated school identified the school as having effective vision if he or she agreed that the school fit the description provided by Sheppard et al, (2010).
- It was accepted that the teachers identified their nominated school as having effective vision if they demonstrated a mean total score above 50% on the eight question survey.

Schools that met these requirements were eligible for focus group interviews and were chosen according to their high mean scores on the staff survey as well as the strength of their response rate. From the original list of ten schools provided by senior staff, four schools were interested in this research and met the above requirements. Due to time limitations, the researchers proceeded with interviews with the two schools that demonstrated the strongest responses on the Likert survey. The two schools chosen were Lakeview and Forest Hill. All school names and participant names have been changed to maintain anonymity. Lakeview had a mean score of 86.6% on the survey and a response rate of 31%. Forest Hill had a mean score of 82% on the survey and a

response rate of 35%. Forest Hill and Lakeview were also the two schools with the highest response rates out of all schools surveyed.

### ***Focus Groups***

The intent of the focus group interviews was to delve into the rich interplay between formal and informal leadership that allows for effective vision, and consequently they form the main body of this research. Focus groups were composed of three teachers from each of the schools that met the criteria listed above.

One of the strengths of interviewing teachers was that it potentially provides validity to this research. It was felt that teachers, who experience the results of the actions and decisions of formal leadership, are best positioned to evaluate its effectiveness. Without having people in formal leadership positions in the interviews, the teachers were free to speak without undue consideration of what their employer might think. As mentioned above, teachers and schools were provided with pseudonyms in order to promote their comfort in sharing their thoughts and opinions.

The questions that were posed to the focus groups were open-ended and were intended to generate discussion (Appendix D.2). There were four main questions and accompanying sub-questions to elicit detail. Each question was designed with a specific purpose in mind: to get a sense of the strength of the shared vision; to learn about the processes behind the creation and enactment of the shared vision; to understand whether the staff's values were represented in the vision, and whether they cared about the vision; and finally, to understand what challenges or supports were present to enact the vision.

### **Summary**

The researchers used a process of triangulation in order to find schools that could be identified as having effective shared vision. This three-pronged approach allowed the researchers to achieve strength of validity for the findings. Once the focus groups were identified, the researchers coded the transcriptions and conducted a thematic analysis. Thus, the discussions from the groups became the main source of information.

## Results

This portion of this paper identifies the strategies used to analyze keywords and themes that emerged from the interviews. The results were coded for 8 repetitive keywords and 10 different themes.

### Introduction

The qualitative data was coded in two ways. The data was analyzed using the coding software, Nvivo, to identify keywords to allow themes and ideas to emerge. The references, as they appear below, refer to the number of times keywords appeared in the transcripts. The number of sources refers to the number of focus groups in which these words were used.

#### *Keyword Analysis*

<b>Keyword</b>	<b># of times referenced</b>	<b>From # of sources</b>
Vision	74	2
Make better	38	2
Values	27	2
Community	18	2
Open	9	2
Creative	5	2
Respect	3	2
Trust	3	1

The researchers also conducted a thematic analysis by identifying and highlighting themes that appeared in the transcriptions. The number of references indicates a line of thought communicated by a participant that was highlighted because it was representative of a particular theme, and also recognizes when that line of thought was agreed to by another participant. The number of sources indicates the number of participants that contributed ideas that matched the theme. *Thematic Analysis*

<b>Theme</b>	<b># of References</b>	<b>From # of Participants</b>
Transformational Leadership	47	6
Vision that represents the values of the stakeholders	46	6
Flexibility of Vision	22	6
Distributed Leadership	19	6
Time	17	5
Collaboration	17	4
Interplay between transformational and distributed leadership	10	4
Professional Development	6	3
Obstacles	5	4
Creative Tension	2	2

The themes that emerged from the literature review served as a primary starting point in the thematic analysis. The researchers searched for evidence in the transcriptions that would refute or support the themes of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaboration, and

values. After coding for cross-themes, the researchers understood and agreed upon the significance of subsidiary, supporting and additional themes that emerged from the data analysis. Themes that were expressing the same idea were clustered together. The researchers found that the emerging themes were intertwined and largely descriptive of each other. Additionally, the keywords from the Nvivo analysis were found to be illustrative of supporting conditions for transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaborative processes, and values. For example, distributed leadership *values* the contributions of others. It involves formal leaders demonstrating *trust* and *respect* for others in informal roles so that the learning *community* can be *made better*. In this manner, the Nvivo keyword analysis ultimately supported and enhanced understanding of the themes that were found.

## **Summary**

The researchers used an inductive approach, trying to remain objective. Focus group discussions were coded for key words and themes so that the conditions described in the literature on vision could be confirmed or refuted, and so that new themes could emerge.

The keyword analysis and the thematic coding revealed the primary themes of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaboration, and values, and the following discussion has been organized according to these dominating themes.

Additionally, the keyword and thematic analyses revealed unexpected and additional findings, such as the importance of professional development to the creation and enactment of a vision; the necessity of creating productive collaboration time for staff; obstacles to effective shared vision; and visions that are effective *because* they lack clear target goals.

## **Discussion**

In this chapter, the researchers compare their findings to what is reported in the literature review. This section is broken down into five subsections: Transformational Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Collaboration, Values, and Unexpected and Additional Findings. The reader will also

find the Limitations of the Study, Recommendations, Further Research Questions and the Conclusion.

## **Introduction**

The themes of transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaboration, and values are highly intertwined concepts. Each theme describes the other themes, and none is independent from the others. In fact, it was not unusual for sections of phrases from the focus group interviews to be coded in more than one way as they often resonated with two or more themes. Although these are the themes that the researchers induced from both the literature on vision and the focus group interviews, there is great overlap in specific terms used and generalized meaning found in the literature. This becomes especially apparent when one examines what was *not* found in the data. There are no references in the data that are contrary to the themes that emerge from the focus group interviews. It was evident, for example, that top-down directives were not the driving force in the schools that were interviewed. Neither did the researchers find any evidence of visions that were grass-roots dominated or devoid of influence from formal leadership. Effective shared vision at both Lakeview and Forest Hill (pseudonyms), were found to be flexible and iterative in their processes. At no time did participants make any references for the need to adhere to any fidelity of implementation in their school programs. Additionally, there were no causative lines of action; the school visions did not emerge from a direct or single source, or follow a hierarchy. There were no figurative or literal flowcharts to indicate the origin of school goals and values, and no set pattern for achieving implementation of those goals and values. The visions at Forest Hill and Lakeview are enacted rather than implemented, and they are “lived” by the school community through their daily actions.

## **Summary of Findings**

### ***Transformational Leadership***

The following definition provided by Cashin & et al. (2000) aided the researchers in identifying qualities that characterize transformational leadership:

The transformational leaders, in many different and unique ways, are proactive. These leaders attempt to optimize not just performance, but development as well. Development encompasses such things as the maturation of ability, motivation, attitudes, and values. They convince others to strive for a higher level of achievement as well as higher levels of moral and ethical standards. Through the development of their teachers, they optimize the development of their school as well. High performing teachers build high performing organizations (p. 17).

In each of the study schools, participants described their administrators without directly being asked to do so. They attributed a great deal of the success of their visions to the actions of their principals or vice principals, and transformational leadership was, empirically speaking, among the strongest themes to emerge from the focus group interviews. Participants described the schools' leaders as the "captain of the ship" and talked about how "creative" they are, how they solve problems outside of conventional solutions and that they "had all these ideas to make it happen." Although it was not the intent of the interviews to give primary focus to the actions of the administrators, the importance that the participants attributed to their leaders, in terms of vision creation and enactment, cannot be overstated.

As defined, a transformational leader encourages colleagues to rise to a challenge. The participants in the focus groups expressed this idea frequently and enthusiastically (Pseudonyms are used throughout.):

Kevin: "I feel like, as a staff, we all are very keen because we have such an amazing principal who is just so supportive that we all work towards our school goals."

Kathy: "They have a way after 20 years or 21 years of teaching, they have a way of making you want to be better. I don't know what, I don't know how they do that but they, I find myself wanting to be a better teacher, a better person, a better friend, just better and I find lack of time, whether it's at school or even in my own personal life, but oh, I really want to do this for school. I want to be better at it. And for some re-... (pause) I don't know why or how they do that. To me, the two of them do."



Luke: “But again, we have to say, [administration] listens, [administration] hears, [and administration] tries to come in and assist and support.”

Justin: “We feel very supported if we go out of our comfort zone. I know that they have our backs.”

With statements such as these, the researchers were able to characterize the administrators of these schools as transformational leaders. Many examples were given of these leaders listening, supporting, assisting, creating opportunities, encouraging, inspiring, and using creative solutions to help the teachers do their job as they saw fit. Participants reported that “there is a high level of trust.” These leaders lit the passion in these individuals and in doing so, created the best environment for teachers to flourish so that students could flourish.

Transformational leadership, as defined by Sheppard et al. (2010) includes formal leaders who are “visionary, change-oriented, goal oriented, intellectually stimulating, and who hold high expectations” (p. 14). The participants in the interviews were quick to describe their own administrators in this way. They saw their leaders as responsive to ideas and change-oriented in order to produce the best results for staff and students.

Harold: I think that the administration, as well, is very open. Both our principal and our vice-principal are very open to all sorts of ideas. One staff member sent an email out and said “oh, there’s a neat little cardboard challenge I saw on YouTube and then the next week there was. We had a big, big full school challenge on cardboard. Like it was just a really neat, like you said, just on a very community, like everyone just has an idea and they just run with it. It allows a lot of creativity.

The transformational leaders within the focus group schools promoted staff development and learning. They were intellectually stimulating, providing opportunities for growth in their schools, not only through attending and participating in professional development alongside their staff members, but also through their attitudes and interactions with teachers. As Harold said, “they aren’t worried about us failing. They don’t use that term. It is always considered learning.” It was clear that the teachers who were interviewed saw themselves as lifelong learners in the context of their relationship with their administrators, and their context within the schools. Teachers referred

to it as “the learning experience” and Justin noted that the administrators’ role in nurturing this had “filtered down to the way I teach now”. Teachers in the interviews felt their administrators framed the school vision by creating supportive, inspiring conditions. Luke framed this experience powerfully and succinctly when he said, “the interesting thing is excellent vision and values are contagious... And you know you can feel yourself rising up to that.”

As a condition for effective shared vision, transformational leadership was valued to the extent that staff at both schools felt that a change in leadership would likely result in loss of the vision. Luke further explained “You know, if it’s a challenging thing with [a] new administrator, you know, bitterness creeps in.. and all that, creates divisions in a staff. But when you have an administrator like [the current one], it’s like the gold bar standard is so high, and you all want to be there.” Although it was acknowledged that previous administrators had added their own flavour to the school vision, the teachers all felt that they were working with extraordinary leadership, and that the level of support and collaboration they were enjoying was not something commonly experienced in their careers. They felt as though transformational leadership was a necessary condition for the enactment and sustainability of the schools’ shared visions.

### ***Distributed Leadership***

As mentioned above, Sheppard et al., (2010) describe distributed leadership as an approach in which there are formal and informal leaders. “Teachers are viewed as partners, rather than as followers, and leadership is defined through the interactions of leaders, constituents, and situation” (p. 2). It is not necessary for administrators to appoint teacher leaders, or even for teachers to explicitly nominate themselves as leaders in order for leadership to be distributed within a school. As described in the above definition, the process is much more organic and situation dependent. The participants in this study never referred to themselves as leaders, and yet, during the interviews, the participants often referred to themselves and other members of the staff as people who took charge of areas that were not necessarily assigned to them. Each person seemed to feel valued, respected, and motivated to push beyond regular responsibilities to take on more leadership roles. Librarians, Professional Development Chair Heads and Intermediate Teachers were all mentioned as people who volunteered their services, and were allowed room to make decisions as

best fit the staff and students. Teachers saw themselves as a team, and that team was inclusive of administration and other members of the school community.

Harold: What I think is different about this school is that the informal statements are of risk-taking, empathy, respect, encouragement, and that we are all valued as a team. So there is students, teachers and admin coming together with one purpose.

While there was mention of the formal leaders as the captain at the helm, there was also a sense of equality. Lyn called it an “open-door.” There was never a feeling of any topic being off limits to discuss with the administrator. Each of the administrators were thought to be open, respectful and open to new initiatives and encouraged teachers to take on more of the informal leadership roles.

The participants felt that their staff worked well together and each member contributed uniquely to their school. When asked if they could sustain their school vision for years to come, one focus group wanted to note that they felt that vision could not continue if there were a significant shift in staff members. In other words, distributed leadership was seen as a necessary condition to supporting effective school vision. Harold, in describing the highly collaborative and engaged staff, said “from my viewpoint, my years of teaching, it is rare to find. When you find it, you hope it’s going to last for quite a while but you know that the removal of the admin or decreases, and they have to get rid of certain staff, say, - it can take just one or two people pulled out of that mix and it changes the whole dynamic.” It was clear from the interviews that distributed leadership does not exist within a vacuum, or more specifically, it cannot come from the efforts of staff alone. It co-exists within the model of transformational leadership: this type of leader fosters leadership in others. Justin expressed this by saying, “I have these big visions, and I don’t feel afraid to go to admin and say ‘what do you think?’”. Distributed leadership alone is not enough to enact effective shared vision. It was the interplay between formal and informal leaders at the focus group schools that brought the energy that was needed to move both schools forward, and enact the vision.

### ***Collaboration***

Collaboration was mentioned enthusiastically and frequently throughout the interviews. It is a condition that participants found essential to the creation and enactment of their shared school visions. This is unsurprising, perhaps, since the school samples were found through a triangulation process whereupon people agreed that “(t)he school has a vision that has been developed

collaboratively”(Sheppard et al, 2010 p.14). When the value of working together is emphasized, the school benefits, and people know the vision. They know where they are going together, regardless of whether it is explicitly stated.

Harold: It’s like a family. You don’t ever ask a family ‘so tell us what’s your goal for your kids and your plan and where you going’ and you just know and I guess it comes from a deeper place. It’s the way we are and the way we that we operate together that creates the current vision.

When time is spent forging relationships and valuing opinions, then visions are strengthened, or as Luke put it, “when the staff is able to buy in as collaborators and colleagues, magic happens”. When the teachers worked together, they valued each other more, and saw the benefits of collaborating. Another participant, speaking about including everyone and working together said, “I think (when we collaborate) we can really employ the creativity that everybody brings to the (informal vision).”

McKay et al., 2004 suggested that neither top-down, nor bottom-up approaches alone were successful in developing and enacting shared vision, and the responses of the focus group participants support the idea that the best school improvements occur from “top-down, bottom-up approaches” (p. 69). As mentioned above, it is through such collaboration that “visioning strategy ha[s] a better chance of embodying the shared visions that ar[i]se from the deeply held values of the stakeholders” (p. 69), and this certainly held true for the focus group participants. Collaboration flourished in the interplay between transformational and distributed leadership. When there was an encouraging leader supporting the staff, teachers felt empowered. When the teachers felt empowered, they took on additional leadership roles in the school. Lyn said, “I think, the most important part is the collaborative administrator.” This administrator was viewed as collaborative because she listened to her staff when she first became their principal. The participants described an order of events that made them feel valued, heard and respected. The administrator took the staff through a collaborative process of sitting together and figuring out what they would include in their vision plan. They collaboratively brainstormed with sticky notes and chart paper. After they created it, they revisited it again and kept it up in the staffroom for reference. This collaboration inspired teachers to take on any roles or responsibilities that they felt would further

the vision, and by association, student learning. Collaboration allowed individuals to come together and build on each other's ideas. It also allowed for each teacher to feel valued and part of the decision-making of what was best for their school. It gave them shared ownership.

Just as Harold saw the actual collaboration as important, he also saw the ability to be dissenting as equally important.

Harold: There is discussion and we get to figure out where are we, where were we, where should we be going and that that input is valued. So we're not always, I don't think, we are not always harmonious. There are times when you, y'know, you might end up being able to say 'I'm upset with this and I wish it was going this way and that' but you can say that.

Kathy agreed by saying "Yeah, you feel comfortable saying that. Absolutely." This staff was genuine enough with each other to allow for the creative tension that is necessary for moving from compliance to a vision to commitment to a vision. They were comfortable with getting stuck and had confidence that they could become unstuck.

Harold: So there are students, teachers and admin coming together with one purpose. And I think our purpose is just connection and that that's what we do here is connect. So if someone has an idea, it can be discussed. And I think also what sometimes can happen is that when you are looking at an informal idea of a plan, that plan is much more flexible, and it can shift, and sometimes it can be going 90 miles an hour. Sometimes it can be going 10 miles an hour and sometimes it can even get stuck for a bit.

The staff were invited to challenge ideas and opinions, stretch their thinking, try new things and then discuss how it went. Participants described collaboration that allowed for openness and great discussions with richness and depth. The collaboration in both schools existed between teachers, and also between the teachers and the administrators. Formal and informal leadership came together. The staff members felt safe to expose their ideas and welcome feedback to create something new.

### ***Values***

Senge's work (1990) suggests that when school values are in alignment with individual values, a teacher has motivation to do more, to go beyond expectations and to live the vision, not just enact

it. When a person connects well with a vision, a deep connection that represents his/her core values, that person is more passionate about the vision and will fully embrace it with all of his/her actions and decisions, which connects the heart and the head. Connecting a shared vision to individual values causes caring. Caring propels actions. Teachers who believe in their vision support it wholeheartedly. “A shared vision is not an idea, ... it is rather a force in people’s hearts,... at its simplest level, a shared vision is an answer to the question “What do we want to create?”” (Senge, 1990, p. 211).

When the participants were asked if they felt that the school vision lined up with their own values, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. The participants gave examples of how the school’s vision aligned with their own values and beliefs. Lyn was able to identify why she feels able to support the school’s initiatives through this alignment. She explained “ I think I feel like the vision lines up with (the administrator) and with me personally ... I think that’s also part of the buy-in because we all feel like it lines up to our values and our educational self. It lines up with everybody’s. There isn’t people going ‘this is totally opposite to how I want to teach’, right?” Another participant connected to the feelings that align with the values. As Justin explained, “It gives me a really warm community feeling that I don’t get at a lot of in other schools. And I feel when I came here, there wasn’t a big transition for me, it was just, I just settled in. Because it was the vision, it’s what I envision the school to be: very open, honest, caring, kids involved in a lot of decision-making.” Harold reasoned that the values and actions all line up with the school’s vision. He identified that “our purpose is just connection and that that’s what we do here is connect”.

In one focus group, when the participants were asked if the vision at their school represented their values about education or how kids learn, and whether it resonated with them, they answered without hesitation and almost in unison:

Kathy: “Absolutely!”

Harold: “Absolutely!”

Justin and Kathy: “100%!”

Another way the participants were able to describe how values were important to their school vision was discussing how they and other staff members “fit.” Harold explained his first interview with his principal was because of a referral: “I was told by other people and mentioned the school

and principal, “oh you would get along so well with them. You are the right kind of person to be there.” And then at the interview, it was, it was a fit and I was offered the job at that instant. I was just like, whoa, this is so amazing. It was wonderful, it was a fit.”

Also discussed were the staff members who do not fit as well. The values of the school are embraced by the administration team and they work to include everyone. They recognize that some initiatives or new decisions will not be a good fit for everyone on staff. They make sure there are options for everyone. Harold further explained “there’s no picking on them, it’s ‘well, we have to be accommodative’”. The team works to keep everyone in mind when working collaboratively and trying new things. Everyone’s values are respected, even those whose ideas may not have been an easy fit.

The literature on vision suggests that collectively espoused values are critical to the creation and enactment of shared vision. The schools that were interviewed were enacting visions that were representative of the values of the schools’ stakeholders. The result, as expressed to the researchers, was contentment, enthusiasm and dedication to the school vision. As Luke reasoned, “When you feel valued, ... it’s like an exponential thing, right! Then we’re much better at valuing so many things around us as well!”

### ***Unexpected and Additional Findings***

The key word and thematic analyses revealed unexpected and additional findings when trying to identify the conditions that support the creation and enactment of effective shared vision. Among these findings are the importance of professional development; the necessity of creating productive collaboration time for staff; obstacles to effective shared vision; and, interestingly, visions that are effective *because* they lack clear target goals.

Professional Development is deserving of a special mention for its role in the creation and enactment of effective shared vision, and the teachers made it clear that new learning, ideas and initiatives in their district played a key role in sparking and shaping their school visions. The teachers at Forest Hill described the impact of professional development on their vision in a variety of ways. Initiatives learned from professional development opportunities became a focal point of direction for the vision. A new staff member, Lyn, commented, “You guys collaborated, even to use Fresh Grade- that that was a school-wide decision. Like, everybody, was on board the Fresh

Grade train ‘cause that’s what you guys decided on.” The teachers also commented that “Daily Five was huge last year” and described how their administrator arranged for them to go see it in action at another school.

Luke: Rachel (the administrator) was ready to say, ‘And this is how we can make it happen!’ She was so innovative in how she could give us time that we were all like, ‘Daily Five! YES!’ And she was like, ‘Okay, let’s order the bins, and, you know, we can get books’ and it was really extraordinary!

Professional development brought the staff together when staff members and administration attended in-service together, and then used their learning to form the basis of further collaboration:

Kevin: I actually went to this meeting with the pro-d chair, and our principal was there. It’s called, “Let’s Continue the Conversation” that was um, shared by the district. So, they gave us some ideas of how to have a conversation with the staff. And then our pro-d chair, with consultation with the principal, got together and sort of planned out, you know, how to create this workshop for the teachers to bring their ideas out.

Additionally, the administrator’s own dedication to professional development contributed to the staff’s respect of her as an instructional leader, and created opportunities for her to support staff and foster trust.

Kevin: I’d also like to add, she attends so much professional development herself. When I was looking into Fresh Grade, I mean, as a new principal, I think it is difficult to attend all the professional development for Fresh Grade because there are just so many, but I know that when I told her I was interested in going to formative assessment, and I had signed up for it, she said that she would go with me. And then, there was another Fresh Grade workshop that I told her I wanted to go to- she said she would go with me.

Professional development often provided a spark and a focus for vision creation and enactment. Furthermore, it supported the staff’s ability to put concepts and goals into action. Professional development offered opportunities for the staff to collaborate and build upon mutual trust and respect.



Availability of time was a condition that focus group teachers saw as crucial to supporting shared vision, and conversely, a lack of time was perceived as an obstacle to effective vision. Interestingly, one of the reasons the teachers at Lakeview felt their vision was able to come together was due to the time they spent on strike which allowed them time to connect on a personal level.

Harold: One of the things we never talk about that I think was really quite critical and it's almost perceived as negative to talk about it is, we were on strike. And we had two weeks of coming together and being on one rotation or another and meeting one another, finding out about people's backgrounds, to know who's got kids and what's going on. That was really quite key. The admin team at that point were able to come out and they would run electrical cords and get us coffee and snacks. These kinds of things that showed us that they valued us... they really did a good job setting the stage... we came together on the streets.

Teachers in the interviews firmly appreciated and recognized the need for time to work together on vision that was not *in addition to* their regular duties. Teachers at both schools described administrators who carved out release time so that school vision work was valued and not seen as an extra. As Harold reports, "they are creative in trying to find ways we can be productive, when it is productive time, instead of y'know, 4:00 after school, or trying to get together at a lunch when it's squishy."

Teachers also expressed a willingness to go above and beyond, in terms of committing their own time to their work, when they were teaching in a supportive environment.

Kathy: I find myself wanting to be a better teacher, a better person, a better friend, just better. And I find lack of time, whether it's at school or even in my own personal life, but oh, I really want to do this for school.

Availability of time is a crucial condition for the formation of effective shared vision, and the administrators in our researched schools found ways to carve out collaborative time for their staff that released them from their regular duties. The effect seems to be, not only productive time, but a strengthening of a school culture where the staff feels valued.

The participants in the focus group interviews were highly positive about the culture and conditions in their schools, and identified very few obstacles to enacting vision in their schools. The issue that did surface, however, was workload. As a result of trying to carve out collaborative time during instructional time, intermediate students were frequently used to help run activities for younger students, resulting in the need for intermediate classes to prepare for these events which created a workload that was met with some challenges. One focus group interview was delayed by two months because, at the first query, the administrator felt the need to decline the survey process as a result of recognizing that the staff were carrying a heavy workload at the time.

One particularly interesting finding was that having an informal, flexible vision, rather than an explicitly stated formal vision was expressed as an advantage. This is, perhaps, intuitive on many levels since a collaborative vision that is lived and shared by the school stakeholders is necessarily in flux and would also be iterative in its processes. That said, the flexible, fluid visions described by the participants at both schools seemed to lack “expectations” as specifically defined in the exhaustive Murphy and Torre meta-study (2015). Murphy and Torre unpacked vision into three dimensions: *mission*, which addresses values and purposes; *goals*, which provide direction; and *expectations* which provide specific targets. They found that all three were necessary to positively impact student achievement. Although it is clear that Forest Hill and Lakeview had visions with values and purpose (*mission*), as well as *goals* to provide direction, both schools appeared to lack specific targets (*expectations*) for school improvement. Participants at both schools were very much aware that they were unable to articulate a formal version of their school visions, including specific targets. “There is a sense of vision in the school and it’s definitely going forward and it’s going forward fast but it’s not really defined.” This caused a small degree of discomfort, and one teacher thought that a formally articulated vision might provide strength.

Kevin: I think everyone shares the vision out differently as well, or the mission statement, or so I just of feel like, I know that there is definitely a focus on the school goals, I just connect it to the school vision... Well, I think sometimes it might be nice if we had the tag line written out or if we featured it on a bulletin board or if we had more assemblies, or something like that.

As a whole, however, the teachers' enthusiasm for their visions at both schools, and their ability to describe their visions in terms of how they were put into action outweighed their slight discomfort at not being able to point to specific targets and expectations. In fact, the researchers wondered if the discomfort at not being able to express specific targets, or a formal version of the school vision came as a result of being interviewed about vision, rather than from a genuine need for clearer articulation of the vision.

The participants at Lakeview actually felt that specific targets, if they came from directives originating outside the school, were actually a source of hindrance to the school vision. Harold elaborated "Those kinds of things can sometimes, I feel, be the impediment as opposed to when we're left, we can go- I think we can come up with fabulous, fitting solutions to anything that's going on." The teachers at Lakeview embraced the flexible nature of their school vision. They recognized that their vision was in process and described it as "developing". But more than that, they expressed a preference for a flexible vision, and felt that this was a preferential way of living an effective shared vision.

Harold: Because you know when you think about formal vision, it is almost like painting lines on a road. You must stay within them. And an informal vision, is almost like ok, let's get the cans out and walk together. Where will we make our lines? And it allows for uniqueness, it allows us to take and use time well. I think then we can really employ the creativity that everybody brings to it.

The finding that flexibility is advantageous in a shared vision has important implications for those trying to create the conditions under which effective vision flourishes. It appears to fly in the face of rational, commonly held ideas about vision, as per the Murphy and Torre study (2015), that in order to be effective, vision needs to include specific targets or expectations. At the very least, this finding suggests that specific targets need to be flexible, and that organizations may need to develop their level of comfort with targets that continually evolve to meet the needs of the stakeholders in their given contexts.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this study is the narrow focus on only two schools and six teacher participants. The opportunity to interview many more schools, and in a variety of districts and provinces would provide greater strength to the study if the findings were repeated. Minimally, a third school should be involved to consolidate evidence that was found where only one school had eluded to a specific condition (for example, creative tension).

Additionally, the views of the administrators of the schools with effective shared vision are not represented here, and their ideas would be of great value to this study. Administrators were purposefully not a part of focus group interviews in order to ensure that teachers would speak freely, however it was only time limitations that prevented the researchers from interviewing administrators separately, and their input would have been highly valued.

Finally, this study would have also benefitted from interviews from other members of the school community such as support staff, parents, and not least of all- the students themselves.

## **Recommendations**

As a result of this study, the researchers recommend that school districts direct time and attention to conditions that support effective shared vision. Transformational leadership, in particular, appears to be an essential condition for effective shared vision. School districts have the ability to highlight and encourage transformational leadership in their administrators, and also in their teachers. Through in-service and professional development, the attributes of transformational leadership can be nurtured and developed. Additionally, hiring practices can be tailored to place significant value on applicants who demonstrate the qualities of this leadership style. Transformational leaders are adept at distributing leadership throughout their school communities, and thus, cultivating transformational leadership will set the groundwork for a second condition that supports effective shared vision.

Collaboration is of key importance to this study and is a necessary condition of effective shared vision. An administrator is not solely responsible for setting the culture of a school or the conditions for a successful shared vision. The teachers who take on informal leadership roles and

who flourish in a participative environment are equally important. The researchers therefore recommend that school districts give appropriate priority to hiring teachers who identify themselves as collaborators and team players. Additionally, professional development that supports collaborative practices, such as how to engage in productive dialogue, or how to establish positive group norms, would be of value.

Time for collaboration has been identified as an important condition. Although the administrators in the schools that were interviewed were very creative in providing time for staff collaboration, it remains very valuable time that is a challenge to carve out. It is recommended that school districts provide release time, where possible, for collaborative time that is used for the purpose of furthering the school vision.

Since the collectively espoused values of the vision's stakeholders have been found to be of great importance, the researchers recommend that administrators engage in professional development on shared vision. Specifically, administrators will benefit from learning about visioning practices that start from building upon the core values of the stakeholders.

The finding that a flexible vision may be more advantageous than a vision with specifically defined expectations may be of particular interest to school districts. It appears that flexible visions allow for staff members to be heard. Flexibility allows for a diversity of values to be heard and acknowledged, and when values are heard, stakeholders become committed rather than compliant to a vision. The researchers recommend that further research be conducted in this area.

Although the possibilities of doing so are very limited, it could be of interest to school districts to set up a test school that intentionally creates the conditions that were identified in this study. It would lay the foundation for a school to begin creating and enacting an effective shared vision, and would allow for greater examination of the conditions found in this study.

## **Further Research Questions**

During the focus group interviews, the participants were asked about the question of longevity of their school vision- could it be sustained with a change in leadership? If the initial conditions were conducive to effective vision, then this solid foundation should be steadfast and carry them strongly

with a change in leadership. The participants did not have the same sense of stability. Most felt that a change in administration would change the school culture and vision. While this may not be entirely surprising since the teachers identified needing a transformational leader to be able to enact their schools' visions, it is still worth investigating further, especially if another transformational leader is placed as new administration. This would help to rule out this being limited to a one-off or single occurring circumstantial situation. It is an area needing further research.

If the researchers were to recreate this study, it may be informative to ask focus group participants to use self-descriptive words to identify their teaching or leadership style. While the administration has been identified as being transformational, it would be useful to know more about the staff members who work with the leader, and how they influence the vision. For example, would teachers in a school without effective shared vision describe their own teaching or leadership styles differently than teachers in a school with effective shared vision?

The researchers were also left wondering if teachers who experienced conditions that support effective shared vision would carry this through the rest of their teaching careers. Would teachers who are exposed to a school that works well, continue to strive to create these conditions if moved to a new school, or possibly be inspired enough to take on a formal leadership role themselves? The opposite question is also considered: would the transformational leaders in this study continue to be successful at other schools if the same conditions existed?

Lastly, and possibly most importantly, does an effective shared vision have an impact on job satisfaction which may in turn affect student achievement? Do teachers who love their job more create classroom conditions that support their students more, all according to the shared ownership of the school's vision? The researchers believe they have reason to answer these questions in the affirmative, however, more research in this area is needed.

## **Conclusion**

From start to finish, the researchers gained ample, rich knowledge about leadership, school conditions, and shared values with regards to how they contribute to an effective shared vision. The literature reviews support the findings and helped the researchers categorize the themes that emerged from the focus groups. Transformational leadership, distributed leadership, collaboration

and values were identified as conditions that allow effective school vision to flourish. The researchers note that, even with these conditions in place, it is not a guarantee that creation and enactment of shared vision would ensue. The researchers also identified obstacles to shared vision such as time constraints and workload.

The most influential condition for effective shared vision appears to be the type of leader(s) of the school. The conditions of distributed leadership, collaboration, and recognition of values appear to rely on leaders who support and encourage these conditions. While having a transformational leader at the helm does not guarantee the creation and enactment of shared vision, it is certainly a strong component of the equation. The staff members also need to be open and willing to rise to the challenges of creating and enacting shared vision.

The participants in this study were instrumental in providing concrete examples of collaborative decision making and positive relationships within their school community. Pride, connections, inspiration, and supportive environments were evident in both schools. Open discussions, risktaking and flexibility were also identified as conditions conducive to a shared vision.

Analyzing the conditions that support the creation and enactment of shared school vision is a significant step in understanding why some schools flourish and others do not. A strong school vision creates positive effects for students, and there can be no greater reason to strive for creating these conditions.

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\* All articles were peer reviewed and found either through the SFU library databases or through researchbriefs.sdsu.edu.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A : Letter to Senior District Staff \*\*\*\*\*,  
2015

Re: Research in the \*\*\*\* School District

Hello Superintendent \*\*\* and Deputy Superintendent \*\*\*,

We would like to introduce ourselves. We are masters students at Simon Fraser University. We are currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership K-12 Program and are beginning our research portion of the program. One of researchers, Gwen Myles, is a teacher at the elementary level in the \*\*\*\* School District. The other researcher, Jaime-Lyn Hugh, is a teacher at the elementary level at an independent school.

We are writing to you to request your assistance in helping us begin our research within the \*\*\*\* School District. Our research question relates to uncovering the factors that contribute to creating, implementing and maintaining effective school vision in elementary schools. We have approval from the \*\*\*\*\* School District to conduct this research however, we need some help in figuring out a starting point.

We are hoping you, and other senior staff members who may also have insight, could provide us with a list of schools which, from your perspective, may fit our definition of having effective vision. But even more so, we are really looking for principals who you know to be open to having conversations about their school or about vision. The definition we are using to identify schools, written by Sheppard et al (2010) is as follows: “The school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practice”.

From the list we are hoping you will provide us, we will send the principals a letter much like this one indicating who we are and what we are hoping to research. We will also send them a confidential online survey about their perspective on school vision. This survey will also be sent on to the teachers in their schools if the principals agree. After the teachers return the survey, we will hold focus groups to discuss their opinions on what factors have been present in the creation, implementation and maintenance of their school vision.

We will share our findings with you, if you are interested. If you would like to meet with us or would like more information, please don't hesitate to give us a call or email a message. We would really appreciate it if you would let us know if you are willing to help us by \*\*\*\*\*, 2015. We will contact you by phone by \*\*\* to discuss your possible assistance in this study. If you are available to let us know prior to this phone call, please contact us using our information below.

We hope to start contacting schools in \*\*\*\*\*.

Thank-you for your consideration of our research and for your time reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Jaime-Lyn Hugh

Gwen Myles 604-308-

7164

604-307-5308 jscarsbr@sfu.ca

gschaefer@sfu.ca Appendix B : Letter to Principals

\*\*\*\*\*, 2015

Re: Research in the \*\*\*\*\* School District

Hello Principal \*\*\*\*\*

We would like to introduce ourselves. We are masters students at Simon Fraser University. We are currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership K-12 Program and are beginning our research portion of the program. One of researchers, Gwen Myles, is a teacher at the elementary level in the \*\*\*\*\* School District. The other researcher Jaime-Lyn Hugh, is a teacher at the elementary level at an independent school.

We are writing to you to request your assistance in helping us begin our research within the \*\*\*\*\* School District. Our research question relates to uncovering the factors that contribute to creating, implementing and maintaining effective school vision in the elementary schools. We have approval from the \*\*\*\*\* School District to conduct this research.

We have contacted senior district staff to ask them for a list of schools that they could nominate as appropriate for our research and interested in our topic of vision and leadership. They have indicated that your school may possibly be open to being part of our research study. We are looking for schools that have effective school vision or closely align themselves with the following definition as it pertains to elementary school vision provided by Sheppard et al (2010): “The school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practice”.

We have two questions for you:

1. Do you feel your school meets or closely aligns itself with the above definition?
2. Do you think your school staff would be interested in participating in our research through an 8-question online survey?

Attached to this email is the confidential online survey about your perspective of school vision. We would greatly appreciate it if you would be willing to complete it. If you agree that your school closely meets the definition above, and think your staff would be open to discussing this topic, this survey will also be sent on to the teachers in your school. After the teachers return the survey, we will invite some schools to participate in focus groups to discuss their opinions on what factors have been present in the creation, implementation and maintenance of your school vision. The focus groups will be a one-time meeting of approximately an hour in length.

We will share our findings with you, if you are interested. If you would like to meet with us or would like more information, please don't hesitate to give us a call or email a message. We would really appreciate it if you would let us know if you are willing to be part of our research by \*\*\*\*\*.

We will contact you by phone by \*\*\* to discuss your possible participation in this study. If you are available to let us know prior to this phone call, please contact us using our information below. Thank-you for your consideration of our research and for your time reading this letter.

Sincerely,

Jaime-Lyn Hugh  
7164  
gschaefe@sfu.ca

Gwen Myles 604-308-  
604-307-5308 jscarsbr@sfu.ca

## Appendix C.1 : Consent Form for Online Survey

### Study Team

Principal Investigators: Jaime-Lyn Hugh and Gwen Myles

Simon Fraser University, Masters of Educational Leadership Program

Jaime-Lyn Hugh: jscarsbr@sfu.ca 604-308-7164

Gwen Myles: [gschaefe@sfu.ca](mailto:gschaefe@sfu.ca) 604-307-5308

The research is for a graduate degree making our project semi- public, displayed to Simon Fraser Students and staff at the Summer Institute of 2016. The information collected will be used to draw conclusions for our research project and turned into a poster for display.

### An Invitation and Our Study Purpose

You are being invited to take part in this research study because we are interested in finding out what factors contribute to the creation, implementation and maintenance of effective school vision.

### Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you may still withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences in any way.

### Our Study Procedures

If you agree to be part of our study, you will answer 8 questions through an online survey using [surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com)

### Potential Risks of the Study

We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you or be bad for you. Some of the questions we ask may seem sensitive or personal. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to.

### Potential Benefits of the Study

We do not think taking part in this study will directly benefit you. However, the findings from this study may benefit you and others.

### Confidentiality

Your confidentiality will be respected. The information that you disclose in the online survey will reveal the school you work for, but will not reveal your individual identity. Any leading details that may link you to your identity are kept confidential. Please note that the online survey is hosted by "Survey Monkey" which is a web survey company located in the USA. This company is subject to U.S. laws, in particular, to the U.S. Patriot Act that allows authorities access to the records of internet service providers. If you choose to participate in the survey you understand that your responses to the questions will be stored and accessed in the USA. The security and privacy policy for Survey Monkey can be viewed at <http://www.surveymonkey.com/>.

### Withdrawal

You may withdraw from this study at any time. Simply exit the survey and any incomplete surveys will be removed from this study.

### Organizational Permission

Permission to conduct this research study from the \*\*\* School District has been obtained.

### Study Results

The main study findings will be presented in a poster style presentation at the Surrey Simon Fraser Summer Institute 2016.

### Contact for Information about the Study

If you have any questions or would like to contact us to discuss this study in more depth, please feel free to contact the researchers directly:

Jaime-Lyn Hugh                      [jscarsbr@sfu.ca](mailto:jscarsbr@sfu.ca)                      604-308-7164

Gwen Myles                              [gschaefe@sfu.ca](mailto:gschaefe@sfu.ca)                      604-307-5308

### Contact for Complaints

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact:

Dr. Jeffry Towards, Director, Office of Research Ethics [jtoward@sfu.ca](mailto:jtoward@sfu.ca) 778-782-6593

Dr. Bruce Beairsto, Supervisor, Department of Education [james\\_beairsto@sfu.ca](mailto:james_beairsto@sfu.ca) 778-782-8597

### Participation Consent and Signature Page

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without a negative impact on you.

- By pressing submit on the survey, you are indicating that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- By pressing submit on the survey you are indicating that you consent to participate in this study.

Appendix C.2 : Survey Regarding School Vision

\*Please note: this survey will be published on Survey Monkey

Name of school:\_\_\_\_\_ Please

indicate to what degree you support the following statements:

1) Goals for the students are discussed in my school.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

My staff shares collective goals for the students in my school.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Goals that are developed for learners are implemented.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

I can easily describe my school's vision.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Other staff members would describe the school vision much like I do.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5



2)

3)

4)

5)

6) A shared school vision influences the choices made in the classroom.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

7) The following statement is true about my school:

“(My) school has a vision that has been developed collaboratively. It is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and has considerable influence on classroom practices” (Sheppard et al, 2010).

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

I feel that my school has a strong vision.

strongly disagree	disagree	uncertain	agree	strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

8)

### Appendix D.1 : Consent Form for Focus Group

#### Study Team

Principal Investigators: Jaime-Lyn Hugh and Gwen Myles

Simon Fraser University, Masters of Educational Leadership Program

Jaime-Lyn Hugh: [jscarsbr@sfu.ca](mailto:jscarsbr@sfu.ca) 604-308-7164

Gwen Myles: [gschaefe@sfu.ca](mailto:gschaefe@sfu.ca) 604-307-5308

The research is for a graduate degree making our project semi- public, displayed to Simon Fraser Students and staff at the Summer Institute of 2016. The information collected will be used to draw conclusions for our research project and turned into a poster for display.

### An Invitation and Our Study Purpose

You are being invited to take part in this research study because we are interested in finding out what factors contribute to the creation, implementation and maintenance of effective school vision.

### Voluntary Participation

Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you may still withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences in any way.

### Our Study Procedures

If you agree to be part of our study, we will ask you to be part of a focus group. In small groups, we will ask questions and lead a discussion with you and your colleagues. Our visit will consist of a maximum of ten questions which will take a maximum of sixty minutes. We will audio record our interviews strictly for our use in this research study. We will transcribe the recordings and look for common themes that evolve from our discussion time with you. The recordings will be kept strictly confidential and only the two researchers involved in this study will have access to them. The recordings will be kept as a digital audio file on a personal ipad that is passcode protected. We will keep the recordings for a maximum of one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

### Potential Risks of the Study

We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you or be bad for you. Some of the questions we ask may seem sensitive or personal. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to.

### Potential Benefits of the Study

We do not think taking part in this study will directly benefit you. However, the findings from this study may benefit you and others.

### Confidentiality

Your confidentiality will be respected. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent. All settings and people involved with be given pseudonyms and kept confidential. As the focus groups will be taking place with more than one individual at a time, we

encourage participants not to discuss the content of the focus group to people outside of the group; however, we cannot control what participants do with the information discussed.

### Withdrawal

You may withdraw from this study at any time without a given reason. All of your prior information will not be used and will be destroyed if you do withdraw.

### Organizational Permission

Permission to conduct this research study from the \*\*\*\*\* School District has been obtained.

### Study Results

The main study findings will be presented in a poster style presentation at the Surrey Simon Fraser Summer Institute 2016. We would like to return to your school and share our findings with you.

### Contact for Information about the Study

If you have any questions or would like to contact us to discuss this study in more depth, please feel free to contact the researchers directly:

Jaime-Lyn Hugh                      [jscarsbr@sfu.ca](mailto:jscarsbr@sfu.ca)                      604-308-7164

Gwen Myles                              [gschaeffe@sfu.ca](mailto:gschaeffe@sfu.ca)                      604-307-5308

### Contact for Complaints

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact :

Dr. Jeffrey Towards, Director, Office of Research Ethics [jtoward@sfu.ca](mailto:jtoward@sfu.ca) or 778-782-6593

Dr. Bruce Beairsto, Supervisor, Department of Education [james\\_beairsto@sfu.ca](mailto:james_beairsto@sfu.ca) 778-782-8597

### Participation Consent and Signature Page

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without a negative impact on you.

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

---

Participant Signature

Date

---

Printed Name of the Participant

## Appendix D.2 : Questions for Focus Group Interviews

### ***Protocol***

- *Thank participants for coming, invite them to enjoy the provided snacks*
- *Introduce ourselves*
  - ❖ *names*
  - ❖ *University we are affiliated with*
  - ❖ *School districts we are affiliated with*
- *Ethics statements and consent form*
  - ❖ *Let participants know that the interview will be recorded and transcribed*
  - ❖ *Read and review consent forms*
  - ❖ *Invite participants to sign consent forms*
- *State purpose of research and discuss research question: **creation, enactment and maintenance of school vision***
- *Choose and state pseudonyms to protect confidentiality*
  - ❖ *Provide name tags for participants to record pseudonyms so that other participants are able to remember the names if they wish to refer to others*
  - ❖ *Remember to provide a pseudonym for the principal as well in case teachers wish to refer to that person*
- *Let participants know that all opinions will be heard and valued*

### Developing Shared Vision

Question One: Purpose of question is to understand the strength of the shared vision. Staff should be able to articulate shared goals. The sub-questions will help delve into the processes that make the vision weak or strong. It will tell where they are in the visioning process, and how they feel about it.

**Your survey responses have indicated to us that, as a staff, you feel that you have a vision that has been developed collaboratively. You feel that it is supported by a clear plan for moving toward it, and you feel that this vision has considerable influence on classroom practices.**

#### **1) Would you be able to describe your school's vision?**

- What are some factors that make it difficult to describe?
- What are some factors that make it easy to describe?

Question Two: Purpose of question is to learn more about the processes behind creation and enactment of shared vision. Was vision development grass roots? Top down?

#### **2) How did you arrive at this vision? Can you tell us a bit about your processes?**

- How involved was the principal in creating this vision? Has it changed with leadership changes?
- How involved were staff in creating this vision?

Question Three: Purpose of question is to find out whether the staff cares about the vision. Does it resonate with their core values? What processes are behind this caring/lack of connection?

#### **3) Does the vision at your school represent your values about education or how kids learn? Does it resonate with you?**

- **What has interfered with your ability to connect with your school vision in a deep way?**
- **What has helped you to connect with your school vision in a deep way?**

*Enacting Shared Vision*

Question Four: Purpose of question is to understand what challenges or supports were present to enact the vision.

**4) Do you feel able to put your school vision into action?**

- **What factors make it difficult to do this?**
- **What processes support your ability to do this?**

*Closing Statement*

We would like to sincerely thank you for your time and for deepening our understanding of school vision. We would be happy to return and share our findings with you if it is of interest to you.