

Leadership-as-Practice in a Rural Saskatchewan School

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This article presents findings from a study that examined how leadership-as-practice was enacted during the implementation of a personalized blended learning initiative in a rural K–12 Saskatchewan school. Using a practice lens, which views leadership as a socially constituted phenomenon, the objective of this qualitative case study was to examine the interactions of the rural school actors as they implemented the improvement initiative. We collected data through observations, interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that leadership emerged through collective problem-solving opportunities shaped by the school's sociomaterial context. Trust, community ties, and shared responsibility fostered a democratic leadership culture. Implications for rural school improvement, the value of teacher leadership, and leadership development are articulated.

Leadership plays an integral role in the operation of schools because of its potential to influence quality teaching and learning (Bush, 2021; Dinham, 2005; Leithwood et al. 2019). In the rural school setting, school leadership takes on particular importance because of the contextual complexities in which these schools operate. Leadership unfolds amid persistent constraints, including operational isolation from other schools, small enrollments, multigrade classrooms that stretch instructional planning, and staffing challenges. These constraints often result in principals and teachers having to assume multiple responsibilities (Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). These realities, coupled with external system pressures, often mean that rural schools operate under tenuous conditions. Many rural schools are in a constant battle to justify their sustainability amid the increasing social and

economic uncertainties facing rural communities. Despite these uncertainties, rural schools remain resilient in their operations as they cater to their student and community needs (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Corbett & White, 2014), and many have developed the capacity to be innovative out of necessity (Wallin, 2007). Resilience and innovation have borne a culture of continuous improvement.

The complex environment within which rural schools operate calls for attention to be paid to how leadership happens in these contexts. In this study, we adopted the view that theorizing rural school leadership through a leadership-as-practice approach facilitates insight into how leadership unfolds in context. Influenced by the turn to practice in social theory (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2001) this approach shifts the focus away from the positional leader as the object of inquiry. Instead, this perspective emphasizes the dynamic actions that emerge through interactions among social actors and the sociomaterial context within which they operate (Kemmis et al., 2014; Raelin & Robinson, 2022). By situating leadership within the everyday practices and interactions of school actors, we move beyond the question of who leads, to instead examine the how of leadership. To understand how leadership unfolded in the selected rural K–12 school, this study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How is leadership-as-practice manifested during the implementation of a school

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- improvement project in one rural Saskatchewan school?
2. What factors in the sociomaterial environment appear to influence how leadership-as-practice is enacted within the school improvement initiative?

In this article we open with a discussion of the definition of “rural,” the role of effective leadership in rural school improvement, and the value of practice theory in understanding rural school leadership. We follow this review of literature with a description of the research methodology and methods that were employed to conduct the research. The findings illuminate the collaborative nature of rural school leadership. School actors engaged in problem-solving opportunities, which highlighted the important role that the context of the rural school played in supporting how leadership unfolded and the vital contribution that teachers made to the leadership process. We conclude by calling for leadership development that is context-specific and that positions all school actors as valuable contributors to the practice of leadership.

Rural School Leadership

Howley et al. (2005) argued that what defines rural is not primarily geographical boundary but rather the significance found in the experiences of people living in rural areas. Similarly, Tieken (2014) explained that what it means to be rural is connected to one’s identity, shaping how individuals see and understand the world. Tieken (2021) added that this deep connection to place is what gives “rural” its importance. These place-based perspectives reveal essential elements of the rural landscape that can be missed by geographic definitions alone. Grant et al. (2024) invited rural researchers to more intentionally contextualize their sites through the use of thick descriptions that will enhance the transferability of a study. Establishing what is meant by “rural” helps to situate this research within the rural space, providing essential context for examining the complexities of rural school leadership.

Rural schools represent a significant component of the education landscape in the western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. During the 2022–2023 school year, these rural schools represented over half (479 of 768) the schools in the province (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.). Additionally, rural schools often are one of the largest employers in rural communities, representing survival of the community and its values (Wallin, 2005). Despite their importance, rural schools operate under tenuous conditions that require them to be adaptive and flexible to ensure viability. Rural educators find creative ways to implement policies and programs and use resources to support teaching and learning, ultimately making school improvement a way of being rather than an initiative.

Research consistently has pointed to the strong relationship between leadership and school improvement (Day & Sammons, 2016; Gonzales et al., 2020; Preston & Barnes 2017; Seashore Louis et al., 2010). In speaking to the role of leadership in school improvement, Sackney (2007) noted that leadership is essential, as it provides clear direction, purpose, probity and a culture that supports enhanced teaching and learning. Given the complex environment in which rural schools innovatively operate, and the way in which improvement initiatives are implemented, attention needs to be paid to what constitutes effective leadership within these schools (Clarke & Wildy 2004). This view also was supported by Preston and Barnes (2017) who noted in their review of successful leadership in rural schools that further research is needed to identify what is required to engender and maintain collaborative leadership in a rural school. Preston et al. (2013) contended that effective rural school leadership requires the incorporation of approaches that are tailored to the context of each rural community. These perspectives underscore the importance of a more nuanced understanding of rural school leadership.

Much of the prior research on leadership in rural schools has emphasized the leadership styles and characteristics of school principals (Coleman, 2013; Ford, 2014; Graham & Miller, 2015; Pina, 2013; Preston & Barnes, 2017) and the contextual challenges that they encounter (Fernandez, 2002; Graham & Miller, 2015; Torres & Scheurich, 2007; Wallin & Newton, 2014). These studies predominantly have adopted a leader-centric perspective, focusing on individual leaders rather than the broader dynamics of the process of leadership. As a result, these accounts have offered an understanding of rural school leadership that focuses on what leaders do and why, with less attention paid to how leadership is enacted in the day-to-day operations of the school (Chia, 2004; Spillane, 2005; Wilkinson & Kemmis, 2015).

Given the small size of rural schools and their staffing constraints, leadership tends to be shared among teachers to facilitate the school’s smooth operations. Wallin and Newton’s (2014) examination of rural principals’ instructional leadership highlighted this complexity, noting that principals perceived that they were to play a supporting, rather than leading, role in the development and achievement of their school’s vision. Indeed, Ewington et al. (2008), in their study on successful small rural school principalship, found that a balance between strong and collaborative leadership was required to respond to the contextual demands of the school.

In an examination of a rural school in eastern Canada, Anderson (2008) observed that the school operated without formal leadership roles—such as vice principal, department heads, or curriculum leaders—making room for teachers to assume leadership roles, particularly in the implementation

of school improvement projects. Starr and White (2008), speaking to the Australian context, highlighted an increase in collaboration among school actors to collectively manage responsibilities related to teaching, learning, leadership, and administration, which led to a revitalized sense of community.

While several authors have spoken to the importance of collaborative leadership in rural schools (Ewington et al., 2008; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Starr & White 2008), much of this work is often framed through a leader-centric lens, focusing on the role of the principal in understanding how the shared approach to leadership happens. For instance, to explore successful leadership in rural schools, Preston and Barnes (2017) conducted a literature review about the qualities, actions, and behaviors of successful rural principals, highlighting the importance of nurturing collaboration in their role as principals. Similarly, Andreoli et al. (2020) examined the connection of school leadership development to school improvement by exploring how rural school leaders participating in a learning leadership community gained insights to support school improvement efforts.

In contrast, this study adopted a practice-based perspective that conceptualized leadership as a socially enacted process. The “practice turn” (Nicolini, 2012; Schatzki, 2001) in social theory provides a useful framework for this shift, as it challenges traditional approaches that privilege individuals over the activities and interactions that constitute social reality. This perspective emphasizes “managerial and entrepreneurial activities, not managers and entrepreneurs; strategy making and sale practices not strategists and salespersons; leadership practices not leaders” (Nicolini, 2012, p. 7). Consequently, rather than centering on what an individual leader does and why, a practice approach highlights the collective activities of all actors, including those without formal leadership roles (Crevani & Endirastt, 2016). This lens enables a more relational and nuanced understanding of leadership (Simpson, 2016) and, when applied to rural schools, provides insight into how leadership “emerges and unfolds” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 3) as school actors collaborate to achieve shared goals within their unique contexts.

Guided by the understanding that practice involves the continuous creation and recreation of meaning through social interaction and shared knowledge rooted in social reality, Raelin (2019) identified eight activities that characterize leadership-as-practice. These activities—designing, scanning, mobilizing, weaving, stabilizing, inviting, unleashing, and reflecting—served as a conceptual framework for analyzing how leadership unfolds in this study. According to Raelin (2016a), designing, scanning, mobilizing, weaving, and stabilizing activities focus on what is being done in the practice, while inviting, unleashing, and

reflecting activities capture the socioemotional components of the practice that help to foster and sustain team dynamics (Table 1).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative, interpretivist design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to illuminate the lived experiences, actions, and interactions of school actors as they engaged in leadership work during the implementation of a school improvement initiative. We employed an instrumental case design to access these activities (Stake, 2005). This approach, according to Stake (2005), is used when the focus is on a specific issue instead of the case itself, allowing the case to become the vehicle through which a better understanding is gained. In this instance, the use of the instrumental case design facilitated an in-depth analysis of how the phenomenon of leadership unfolded during the implementation of an improvement initiative in the identified rural school (the case). This approach aligned with other practice-based studies, which have emphasized understanding phenomena by closely examining the action and considering what is routinely done by participants as they engage in the activities of the practice (Sergi, 2016).

Site and Participant Description

In alignment with Coladarci’s (2007) recommendation that rural research should offer a comprehensive description of the rural context, in this inquiry we provided an in-depth portrayal of the setting. This rich or thick description allows readers to make informed decisions about the transferability of this study’s findings for rural education in similar contexts (Grant et al., 2024). The study was conducted at a rural school in Saskatchewan, situated in a community with a population of fewer than 5,000 people and located at least 100 km from the urban center of Saskatoon. The school was purposefully selected due to its proximity, which supported travel and time considerations, and because it was preparing to implement a school improvement initiative. This purposeful selection enabled an in-depth exploration of leadership practices during the implementation of an improvement initiative in a rural setting, as the site offered a manifestation of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). The focus of the study was the elementary section of the school, which comprised six teachers (one of whom was employed half-time, and another who worked across grades K–12 for physical education). With a student population of 72 students, the elementary section was divided into four multigrade homerooms: grades 1 and 2, grades 3 and 4, grades 5 and 6, and grades 7 to 9.

Douglas School (pseudonym) was closely connected with the community. Several of the staff members were long-standing members of the community and had attended the school as students; several generations of their families also

Table 1
Activities of Leadership-as-Practice

	Activities	Description
The “what” of practice	Designing	Designing, involves a team discussing varying approaches and then deciding on the respective responsibilities that each member of the team will take on.
	Scanning	Scanning focuses on identifying resources whether information, or technology that can support the work of the team.
	Mobilizing	Mobilizing draws attention to a specific initiative or direction by bringing the attention of other actors to a particular program of action or a project that can inform the activity.
	Weaving	Weaving facilitates the creation of webs of interaction across existing and new networks to document and mobilize mutual activities which in turn builds trust and a sense of shared meaning.
	Stabilizing	Stabilizing, facilitates the provision of feedback to the program of action to bring together activity and examine effectiveness, thereby resulting in structural and behavioral changes and learning.
Socioemotional component	Inviting	Inviting creates opportunities for those who are non-participative to join in the leadership process by sharing their ideas.
	Unleashing	Unleashing ensures that everyone who wishes to participate in the leadership process gets a chance to contribute without fear of repercussion
	Reflecting	reflecting, enables thoughtfulness within the self and with others to consider the meaning of past, current and future experiences in order to learn how to address shared needs and interests

Note. Adapted from Raelin (2016a, pp. 12–13).

attended the school. The school’s superintendent served as a teacher and the principal at the school for several years, and his children attended the school. The Douglas community was primarily made up of two-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2023), many of whom were former students who had returned to the community to raise their families. The generational influence on the school community was palpable. The small size of the school enabled students, teachers, and families to be personally and professionally connected. This connection engendered high levels of trust between community members and school personnel. In the early 2000s, the threat of closure due to declining enrollment and economic challenges was the impetus for the members of the school community to take on a strategic initiative to sustain the school. This initiative resulted in establishment of a learning center that supported several communities in the school district. This period of uncertainty made community members, including teachers, more open to innovation and change, especially if it contributed to the school’s sustainability.

School Improvement Initiative

The school implemented an improvement initiative in the elementary section as part of its response to the

district-wide adoption of personalized electronically blended learning (PeBL). This learning philosophy advances a learner-centred process designed to gradually and intentionally shift the responsibility for learning from educators to students, equipping students with the skills needed to succeed as 21st-century learners. The pedagogical approach is guided by an implementation framework that outlines strategic priority areas to create an enabling learning environment in a school.

To put this approach in practice, the Douglas School team developed an innovative initiative that involved project-based learning (PBL). To facilitate the initiative, the school’s timetable was divided into three distinct blocks. In the first block, the students were divided into two groups: grades 1–5 and grades 6–9. In the first hour, one group of students attended English language arts (ELA), and the other attended math. For the second hour of the day the students switched subjects. The second block consisted of self-directed learning time (SDT), which alternated with physical education (PE). During this block, students were split into three groups: grades 1–3, grades 4–6, and grades 7–9. Two groups worked independently on their personalized ELA, math, or PBL goals under teacher supervision, and the third group participated in PE. The groups rotated through

these activities so that all students engaged in both SDT (60 minutes) and PE (30 minutes) each day. The third block was dedicated to PBL, where students explored curricular outcomes from a multidisciplinary perspective. Teachers selected specific learning objectives to address during this time and delivered instruction over one- to two-week periods.

The change in the school's timetable and the implementation of the PeBL philosophy changed how teachers worked individually and collaboratively. Instead of being solely responsible for teaching math or ELA, individual teachers now cotaught these subjects across grade levels in teams of three. Additionally, at least two teachers cofacilitated each section of self-directed learning time. This shift meant that teachers shared responsibility for addressing the learning needs of students across grades.

The implementation of the initiative faced several challenges. Teachers had to adjust to the new approaches, which required them to engage with students across self-directed time, project time, and ELA and math instruction. In addition, some teachers faced increased demand on their time to manage the logistics of students' transitions between sessions and to provide support to students who were not demonstrating the behaviors necessary for self-regulated learning.

Methods

Data collection methods included nonparticipant observation of five project meetings (see Appendix), semi-structured interviews with 12 participants involved in the initiative, and analysis of project documents. Participant details, including their involvement with the initiative, their position, and their work experience, are provided in Table 2. These individuals were engaged as participants of the study because of their role in the planning and implementation of the initiative; pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Influenced by Crevani's (2011) work, this inquiry did not capture all the activities of the school actors; rather, it focused on the "instances of work" in which the practice of leadership was related to the school improvement initiative. Using Raelin's (2016a) activities as a framework for analysis, we focused our attention on observing the representative activities during five project meetings at which the improvement initiative was the topic of discussion. This approach focused observation on the leadership-as-practice activities in which participants were engaged as they planned, reported on, and implemented the improvement initiative. The use of nonparticipant observation allowed us "to access the field and check while the constituent activities of practice are running or going in their naturalistic way" (Bispo, 2015, p. 316). Participants were interviewed to acquire historical information about the school and insights into their interactions and actions

as they worked together to implement the project. These in-person interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

We saved all files, namely field notes, reflections, meeting transcripts, interview transcripts and document notes, to the qualitative data analysis tool, NVivo, which was used to store, code, retrieve, and make comparisons in the data. The data analysis process was iterative rather than linear, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data through the transcription process, electronic review, highlighting key concepts, and memoing. Next, we identified initial codes using Raelin's (2016a) leadership activities—designing, reflecting, scanning, stabilizing, unleashing, inviting, weaving and mobilizing—as a foundation while also capturing emergent codes that surfaced during review. These codes were then grouped to identify preliminary themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and connected to the research questions, leading to further consolidation and recoding. The resulting themes provided a structured framework for interpreting the data in relation to the study's objectives.

Findings

This study explored how leadership-as-practice manifested during the implementation of a school improvement project in a rural Saskatchewan school and the factors in the sociomaterial environment that appeared to influence how leadership-as-practice was enacted within the initiative. As such, this study sought to capture leadership-as-practice during the implementation of the school improvement initiative by paying attention to the mutually discursive actions and interactions of all those involved. Nonparticipant observation of dialogue provided access to the tacit behavior of participants as they engaged in leadership work. The excerpts below capture moments from conversations among participants as they engaged in leadership-as-practice activities during five improvement initiative meetings. We observed to locate instances of the eight activities of leadership advanced by Raelin (2016a). All eight activities were identified, with some activities occurring more frequently than others across the meetings.

While the eight activities of leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016a) served as the initial analytical frame for the study, in our analysis, we found that the implementation of the improvement initiative presented several problem-solving opportunities to which the team had to respond as they worked on the initiative. These opportunities saw the team engaging in a three-stage problem-solving process as depicted in Figure 1. In the first stage, problematization, team members came to a common understanding of the issue under consideration. The second stage, exploration,

Table 2
Participant Details

Name	Involvement with initiative	Post	Work experience
Carla	Direct	Math teacher Student leadership team (SLT) advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 21 years • Teaches Math • Leads the SLT
Carrene	Direct	Intern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate student intern • Works with the math team on the project • Mentored by Carla
Dahlia	Direct	Teacher (half-time)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 20 years • Teaches ELA half-time with Stacy
Denise	Direct	Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal • Has been at Douglas for seven months • Forms part of the school's triad
Karen	Indirect	Physical education PE teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 6 years • Past student of the school • Grew up in the community
Keisha	Indirect	Learning philosophy supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides support to the principal • Provides support to the learning philosophy mentor
Lisa	Direct	Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school in various capacities for 8 years • Supports Tamika in SST tasks for the school • Teaches at the high school
Marie	Direct	Intern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate student intern • Mentored by Stacy and a high school teacher • Worked with the ELA team on the project
Paul	Indirect	Superintendent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent past 6 years • Served as principal for 6 years; previously was a teacher at the school for 7 years • Has kids attending the school
Shawna	Direct	Learning philosophy mentor Math teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 5 years • Teaches math • Did her internship at the school and was mentored by Tamika • Also holds the position of the personalized and blended learning PeBL mentor • Forms part of the school's triad • 30% learning mentor, 70 % teacher
Stacy	Direct	Kindergarten teacher ELA teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 10 years • Teaches kindergarten and ELA
Tamika	Direct	Student support teacher ELA teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has been with the school for 8 years • English ELA teacher • Student Support teacher - SST • 60% SST, and 40% teacher • Forms part of the school's triad

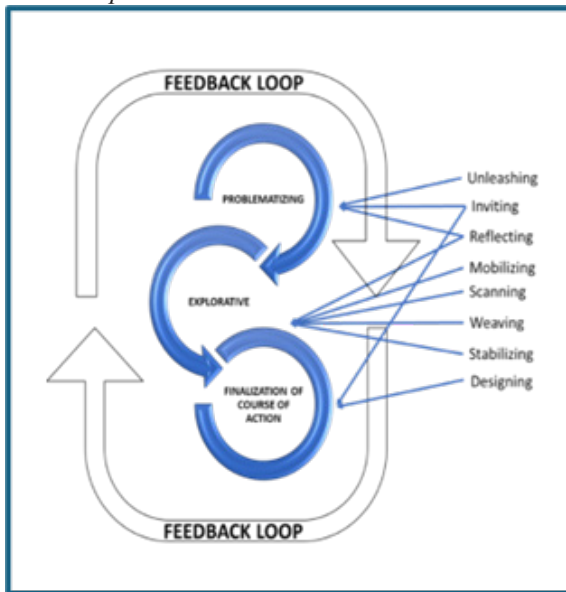
focused on investigating the nature of the problem and potential strategies to solve it. In the third stage, finalization, the team agreed on a course of action to solve the problem. This problem-solving process resembled the Simplicity

Creative Problem Solving Process (Basadur et al., 2000) in which divergent and convergent thinking interact through a three-step process of fact finding, idea finding, and solution finding (Puccio & Murdock, 2005). This model emphasizes

the importance of clearly identifying and understanding the core of a problem before attempting to address it, and it promotes genuine collaboration and diverse ways of thinking (Dong & Dave, 2014). These problem-solving opportunities were evident in all team meetings, and we identified the eight activities of leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2016a) across the three phases of the problem-solving process.

Figure 1

Leadership-as-Practice Model



Drawing on several examples of problem-solving opportunities that arose during the initiative, in the following section we outline how instances of the activities of leadership-as-practice emerged across the three problem-solving phases.

Problematization

The problematization phase involves the identification of an issue or problem that needs to be addressed. During team meetings, the identification of a problem typically arose because of challenges in the implementation of the initiative or because an aspect was of concern to one or more members of the team. The concerned team member(s) usually brought the issue to a meeting or raised it in a meeting to seek clarification and collaborative problem-solving.

Unleashing

An unleashing activity provides opportunity for everyone to contribute to the initiative without fear of repercussions. An example of an unleashing activity in leadership-as-practice was evidenced during the following instance of the problematization phase during the first project update meeting (meeting A). At this meeting,

teachers were encouraged to share the challenges they had faced with the project to date. During this meeting, Shawna shared her struggle with having the right information about what was happening on days when Dahlia, who taught half-time at the school, took on Stacy's ELA duties while Stacy taught kindergarten.

Denise: Okay, what are some of the struggles we are having? And yes, this is a safe, open spot. We are not going to dwell on anything, but let's talk about it to see if we can help each other out here. Shawna (math teacher/PEBL mentor): Sometimes making sure that between Dahlia and Stacy we all have the right information for what's happening between the days.

Dahlia: It is funny, it is a lot of extra time because we have to wait until the day ends so we are planning until 9:00 at night because we have to catch up from what the other person did. I feel like I am working a lot more, but I mean, that's just a different type of work at a different time.

Tamika: I feel like we are making it work.

Denise's comment, "this is a safe, open spot," provided the opening for Shawna to share her struggles with the project, while being mindful of the other teachers with whom she had to work even more closely because of this initiative. In the discussion that followed, the other teachers also shared that it had been a difficult transition with the additional work required, but they believed that the situation would get better with time.

Exploration Phase

The exploration phase occurred when teachers collectively brainstormed "useful imaginative solutions" to the problem (Basadur et al., 2000, p. 79). Once the educators identified a problem, they collectively began to explore viable alternatives, engaging in additional activities found in the leadership-as-practice process. The following excerpts capture the team's engagement in several instances of the exploration phase. These examples illustrate the reflecting, stabilizing, scanning, mobilizing, and weaving activities of leadership-as practice.

Reflecting

The reflecting activity speaks to those actions or conversations that allow team members to individually or collectively think about the meaning of their experiences in order to learn how to address their shared (collective) needs (Raelin, 2016a). The following excerpt from meeting B, the second project update meeting, captures an instance of the reflection activity as the teachers discussed what steps should be taken to respond to the challenges they faced with the implementation of the SDT component of the initiative.

During SDT, students were expected to continue working on learning outcomes from ELA, math, or PBL. As there was no direct instruction during this period, students had the autonomy to choose what to work on, while teachers were in the classroom to offer support as needed. Prior to the implementation of SDT, the teachers were apprehensive about the execution of this period—particularly about how many teachers would be needed and how they would support the students. After reflecting on her experience with SDT, Dahlia shared her thoughts on the number of teachers necessary to support SDT. Upon reflection, she recognized that teachers could have been granted preparation time while others supervised the students.

Dahlia: In terms of all the teacher bodies, then are we going to continue that in self-directed time, or are we going to make sure that you [looking at Shawna] get your PeBL time, and you [looking at Tamika] get some SST time?

Denise: We are going to make sure that everybody gets some prep time.

Dahlia: How are we working that out? Like I said, I got home at 12:00, when I realized that I probably could have kicked Tamika out of the room. We probably didn't both have to be there.

Shawna: Well, why don't we just alternate, then? So if it's you and Tamika, one day it's Tamika, the next day it's you.

Dahlia: Take a look at the week and see who needs that time when...

Shawna: Take it as you need it. I can use it as PeBL mentor or prep. She [looking at Tamika] can use it as SST or prep. So, we have our PeBL mentor and our SST time scheduled in? [The team members nodded their heads in agreement.]

This reflection was met with affirmation from team members, who then engaged in a discussion of possible options that would allow all teachers to receive preparation time by scheduling release time from SDT supervision.

Stabilizing

The stabilizing activity speaks to those actions and interactions (conversations) that provide feedback on the project, resulting in an examination of the effectiveness of the project's implementation. This feedback allows for structural and behavioral changes as well as learning that will facilitate the successful implementation of the plan of action or project. An instance of this activity was evidenced in the following exploration process during meeting A, when the teachers discussed how to help students self-regulate so that they would be better able to personalize their learning.

Careene: I don't know where this fits, but for kids with this whole self-regulation vs. teacher

regulated, what type of language do you look out for in kids if they are kind of abusing the process? ... I don't want to say that kids are being disingenuous, but at the same time, I feel like there are sometimes when I will get a pout when I ask someone to move. Or I get the angry, "Well you can't tell me because I need to be on this bouncy ball because it's my best learning." I think some of the kids are starting to gain the language of "To do my best learning," but it is becoming more of like [an excuse].

Denise: So, tell me more about that? Go get your learner profile out [demonstrating strategy].

Tamika: Just say go get your learner profile and explain to me [demonstrating strategy].

Denise: And show me where all that fits in for you.... If you really believe that the child is being kind of sneaky about it, I would say, "You know what, for right now, I don't have time to argue with you or discuss it, so right now you are going to do what I want, but at recess..." [demonstrating strategy].

Dahlia and Tamika: Yes.

Denise: "You are going to get your learner profile, and we will have a conversation." It would be so interesting to see how fast they change.

Careene: Okay, yes [nodding her head in agreement].

Through dialogue, teachers were able to understand how they could better respond to students who may have been undermining the purpose of or misusing SDT. This conversation was important for all the teachers because guiding some of the students to self-regulate was a major challenge throughout the process. Denise was able to bring to the discussion her experience in implementing personalized learning. Prior to becoming the Douglas School principal, she implemented personalized learning in her classroom and served as mentor for the implementation of the personalized learning philosophy in that school and the wider school district.

Scanning

The scanning activity involves the process by which team members identify resources that can advance the implementation of the project. In one conversation during the ELA team project meeting (meeting E) the ELA team identified and discussed several ELA apps (resources) that could help students, with Stacy mentioning that she had already purchased a few apps in anticipation of the need.

Mobilizing

The mobilizing activity concerns actions that bring attention to initiatives, or historical information about the

organization that could be used to inform how the project unfolds. In the following excerpt from the second project update meeting (meeting B) the mobilizing activity was evidenced as Dahlia shared her concern about not knowing what areas the students need to work on during SDT. In response, Tamika drew attention to student assessments.

Dahlia: I feel like self-directed time is most wasted for grade 2. I just feel like grade 2s are pretty big, and once we've got data and stuff, we'll know.

Tamika: Part of that is going to come from the assessment results. Part of that will be coming from Stacy, too, to think about all the extras that she was always doing with them. And remember EAs [educational assistants] will start pulling students for self-directed time as well.

Carla: When do you think that the assessments are going to get done?

Tamika: I am just waiting on the math. Everything else is done.

Shawna: This is not our teaching time. In self-directed time. We are supposed to be teachers in that we are to help like a regular classroom.

In this instance, team members were reminded that once completed, the assessments would provide valuable information that could mobilize them to offer targeted support to students.

Weaving

The weaving activity includes those interactions in which team members make connections across networks to advance mutual activities and build trust. A simple weaving activity was evidenced as teachers sought to make sure that whatever was happening in relation to assigned seating during SDT also occurred during ELA and math periods. This weaving activity was evidenced in the following excerpt of meeting C—an impromptu meeting that was called in response to the challenges that teachers were facing. In this excerpt, the teachers discussed seating during ELA and math. One teacher inquired whether the students' seating assignments in ELA and math would also apply during SDT sessions.

Carla: And so, these are the spaces they should be in for all subjects, every time they are in that particular room, is that right or are we just talking ELA/math?

Dahlia: That's a good question. Are you finding the same thing with math, or what about projects? I don't think I had [student name] for projects yet.

Shawna: For projects, [student] did really well.

Dahlia: Self-directed time [student] is not in that room. He is in the [grades] 1 to 3 room. But he is definitely the one I have to watch the most.

Shawna: So, there is a spot I think in there, too, is there a spot against the windows with one of those tables. If not, we can get one there easily.

Stacy: Not in the [grades] 1 to 3 room.

Shawna: So maybe we need one there for him, too, so [student] knows that that is his spot. And maybe what we can do, too, for ELA/math, is to say, "That's your spot for self-directed time," but if you find he needs to be out doing group work or whatever, we say, "That's your spot. If we have to say 'self-regulate' once, then you have to go back to your spot." So, we can call it his spot.

In this excerpt, through her question, Carla facilitated the creation of a connection between two components of the project and the related seating arrangements. The teachers then moved into a discussion to compare how these specific students were working across different classes, thereby making important connections across the different components of the project.

Finalization Phase

Once teachers had collectively explored possible alternatives to problems that had arisen, they moved to a finalization stage during which they decided a course of action. In this phase, teachers recapped strategies so that everyone understood the plan for moving forward, and they clarified who would be responsible for what actions and when. This phase is what Basadur et al. (2000) described as the "solution implementation activity" (p. 78) in the creative problem-solving process.

Designing

In a designing activity, a team discusses options for a course of action and assigning responsibilities to move the project forward. Designing was evidenced in the following excerpt of meeting E, which involved the ELA team as Stacy recapped the group's intent to define teachers' responsibility for different grade levels.

Stacy: We need to divide and conquer a little bit.

Tamika: Well, that is what I need to know. What am I dividing and conquering? ...

Stacy: Can you do me a favor, figure out what teacher times it is that we have not done the lesson for?

Tamika: I have already started that I have just got to update the last little bit.

Dahlia: Guided reading is good. Your grammar is planned. The word work is planned. The one day that I had that grade 4 group, we just sat around with a book and made some predictions so really it would end. The writing ... Marie is doing right now.

Stacy: I think you are right. So here is my plan tomorrow, Tamika, if this works for you, it's you, I, and Marie.

Tamika: Yes.

Stacy: So if we start all together, and then we split into the three areas, and, Marie, let me know if you are comfortable with this, too, I will take the [grades] 1–2 and those [grade] 3 that need to go across to the [grades] 1–2 room, because that is where Dahlia and I will be on opposite days. We'll start the conversation together. I'll take them, and we'll establish some rules over there about what it is going to look like and give a reminder of what their jobs are, etc. Tamika takes that [grades] 5–6 side with the kids that need to be regulated, and you can have a conversation with just them about your expectations. And, Marie, are you comfortable then taking the [grades] 3–4 personalized side—the kids that are kind of ready to roll but still having a conversation about, “You can earn your way back over there at any time”?

Marie: Yes.

In these conversations, team members made suggestions that provided direction as tasks and responsibilities were negotiated among team members. In fact, this activity was a redesign of a past practice that needed to be changed.

Inviting

The inviting activity was also evidenced in the above excerpt. This activity is seen in actions that seek to invite those persons who do not readily speak out during team discussions to share. In this excerpt, Marie, a student intern who usually was quiet in meetings, was asked to say whether she was comfortable with the way in which Stacy was suggesting that the grades 1–5 ELA class would unfold the next day. While in the conversation quoted above Marie just responded in the affirmative to the invitation to share whether she was comfortable with Stacy's suggestion, she later continued her participation in the meeting by asking clarifying questions. During meeting E, Marie spoke three of the four times that she commented during any of the meetings she attended.

Feedback

While working through the problem-solving phases of this leadership work, the team regularly offered feedback on the success or failure of solutions that were identified and strategies that were put in place. Team members intentionally created space to learn from the changes they made to improve the implementation of the initiative over time. The value of the feedback was evident in meeting E, shared above, during which the team incorporated feedback on what they had observed to rethink the way students were

allowed to work during ELA. Consequently, the ELA team changed the supervision structure of ELA so that students had to demonstrate that they were ready to personalize their learning before moving to the personalized learning section of the classroom.

At Douglas School, using a practice-based lens to explore how leadership happened revealed that leadership emerged through a set of interrelated activities that shaped how the school improvement initiative was carried out. These activities aligned with Raelin's (2016a) framework, which groups leadership actions into two main categories. The first category, referred to as “the what of the practice” (p. 126), includes functional tasks, such as designing, mobilizing, scanning, weaving, and stabilizing. These activities guided and coordinated the work. The second category consisted of socioemotional activities—inviting, unleashing, and reflecting—which are required to “support and sustain the team while engaged together” (p. 126). These activities are essential for building trust, fostering collaboration, and sustaining the team's engagement over time. In the context of Douglas School, both sets of activities were evident during team meetings and were instrumental in enabling the group to collaboratively implement the school improvement project. As Crevani and Endrissat (2016) described, these activities helped to “produce direction for organizing” the work, allowing the team to collectively negotiate and adapt the initiative in ways that responded to their local context (p. 23).

Factors Influencing How Leadership Unfolded

Culture of Trust

During team meetings, each team member contributed to the discussion and provided input on directions that were taken. Though individual contributions were diverse and not always in agreement, the group discussed issues until they agreed on a way forward. Raelin (2016a) described this process as the democratic nature of the practice of leadership that “encourages the equal contribution and access of all engaged actors within the public forum” (p. 144). The path or the direction of the overall process was guided by varying members of the team as they engaged in the discussion. Individuals did not always wait for the principal to tell them how to solve problems. Rather, they engaged in authentic conversations in which they freely exchanged thoughts and experiences, which in turn influenced the final decisions. The teachers took ownership of the project and provided feedback that helped to guide the decisions that were made. The positional leader did not stay silent in the meetings in which she participated, nor did she overpower these meetings. Instead, Denise, the principal, positioned her role as the “first among equals” (Wilkinson, et al., 2014, p. 77). As Dahlia explained in her second interview,

We are the ones running it, and we have Denise's full trust.... I think because those check-ins happen, and we know that we have her trust, I think we just feel like we are the soldiers, kind of running the floor so we know she trusts us.

Denise helped to develop a culture of trust where teachers felt safe to provide their input as knowledgeable equals, without fear of repercussion or censure. Such practices opened space for leadership activity to occur organically and emerge from all members of the team.

This culture of trust, which was also evidenced between the teachers and between the school and the community, was one of the key factors in the sociomaterial context that influenced how leadership-as-practice was enacted. The parents entrusted the teachers, and by extension the school, with acting in the best interests of their children. For example, Dahlia elaborated about the need to stay on top of the implementation of the initiative by working through the kinks to be accountable to the parents:

I feel I am accountable to all these parents, I guess maybe because I am one, too, and I am in the community, and a lot of them are catching me at the rink. So, I just feel like I need an answer.

This sense of trust was also reflected in the relationships among team members. Keisha emphasized that the staff's openness and willingness to be vulnerable with one another played a significant role in the team's success:

Part of it is your relationships, your vulnerability, your risk taking.... It is the hope that at a certain point that they can feel comfortable that they can do that [express concerns] in their own building. It is not about judgment..., that's a staff culture piece... I'd say that that staff is pretty darned open.

Keisha's reflections highlight the depth of trust that existed among the teaching staff and how this culture of openness supported how leadership-as-practice unfolded. This trusting environment was evident during the inviting and unleashing activities in the first project update meeting (meeting A), where staff felt safe to express concerns and challenges related to the project. Ultimately, this climate of trust fostered an enabling environment where team members were willing to collaboratively work on problem-solving opportunities as they came up during the implementation of the initiative.

Collaboration and respect were evident as the team from Douglas collectively solved the challenges they faced during the implementation of the project while engaging in the activities of leadership-as-practice. For example, Denise indicated that prior to the start of the project, teachers participated in a professional development session related to different personality types. Teachers learned how their personality types affected their responses to each other and

how they dealt with change. Tamika outlined the value that this learning provided to the group:

We have done a lot of work in understanding them [personality types]—what each of us needs to be successful and to be happy. I am always taking into account those things and what I know about my colleagues. I understand what one person might need..., and I know that what Carla might need may be different things.

The teachers were aware of personality tendencies and worked with each other to avoid threatening inclusive relationships or trust. Consequently, the teachers were able to develop collegial and inclusive processes for implementing the project, reduce interpersonal conflict, avoid internalizing critique as personal attacks, and be more metacognitively focused on how their relationships affected the implementation of the project. According to Raelin (2018), sustaining collective leadership requires participants to remain open to diverse perspectives and engage in meaningful constructive dialogue.

Several contextual factors enabled the democratic and collaborative leadership culture at Douglas School. The school's history, including a prior threat of closure, acted as a catalyst for innovation and flexibility in both pedagogy and leadership. This challenge prompted a collective response rooted in resilience and adaptability. Many of the teachers had long tenures at the school (see Table 2) and deep personal ties to the community, often serving not only in the role of educators but also as parents and former students. These overlapping roles fostered a strong sense of ownership, solidarity, and trust among staff, which extended to their relationships with parents.

The findings of this study suggest that the rural context contributed to the way in which the school functioned. Its small size and close-knit community, where parents often were former students and staff members were deeply embedded in the school's generational fabric. These factors facilitated a relational and trusting environment. Informal community events provided natural opportunities for parents to engage with staff and check on the initiative's progress, reinforcing mutual accountability and further embedding collaboration into the school culture. These connections created a strong foundation of trust among teachers and between the school and its parent community. Indeed, this trust supported a collaborative atmosphere in which leadership-as-practice emerged organically. Teachers took collective ownership of the initiative and worked together to implement the school's learning philosophy as they worked toward positive student outcomes.

Discussion

Adopting a practice perspective to explore how leadership happens provides insight into the collaborative

nuances of leadership. This understanding emphasizes collective effort over individual authority. From this standpoint, leadership is viewed not as the actions or traits of a single person, but as a shared process grounded in the interactions and contributions of multiple individuals (Raelin, 2016b). This perspective centers on “what people may accomplish together” rather than “what one person thinks or does” (Raelin, 2016b, p. 3). Paying attention to what the school actors accomplished together at Douglas School responds to Preston and Barnes’s (2017) call for research that identifies conditions necessary to foster and sustain effective collaborative leadership in a rural school. In these contexts, small enrollments, multigrade classrooms, and staffing constraints often require principals and teachers to take on multiple roles (Augustine-Shaw, 2016; Hardwick-Franco, 2019; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Wallin & Newton, 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Such conditions make collaborative leadership not only beneficial, but essential, to ensure the effective operation of these schools.

What stood out at Douglas was how the activities of leadership emerged organically throughout the team’s collaboration. Andreoli et al. (2020), in their review of leadership in rural school improvement efforts, explained that collaborative decision making is essential in rural school improvement. Their finding was evident in this study of how leadership unfolded at Douglas school, where different school actors initiated various actions depending on the issues at hand. These activities were interconnected, appearing fluidly during meetings as the group worked through challenges and made collective decisions. The activities of leadership-as-practice enabled what Argyris and Schön (1996) referred to as “double-loop learning.” This approach to problem-solving requires not just behavioral adjustments but also deeper reflection on underlying beliefs and assumptions. Robinson (2018) described this kind of learning as involving shifts in both actions and values, which was evident in how the Douglas team approached several problem-solving moments during the implementation process.

Preston and Barnes (2017) noted that “successful school rural leadership is founded on the healthy establishment and maintenance of relationships ... with/among staff members, parents, students, and community stakeholders” (p. 8). At Douglas the principal played a vital role in cultivating trust by empowering teachers to take initiative and make decisions. Teachers reported feeling supported and trusted, which encouraged them to fully engage in the project’s implementation. This trust was not only hierarchical but also lateral, as evidenced in the collegial relationships among team members. As Woods (2016) noted, individuals are more likely to engage in leadership when the environment promotes trust, confidence, and mutual respect. Ultimately,

the leadership culture at Douglas reflected what Woods (2016) further described as a democratic structure, one that values “openness, inclusivity, and meaningful participation, where relationships are characterized by mutual affirmation, flexibility, and shared purpose” (p. 81). In this environment, leadership was coconstructed through authentic collaboration among teachers and the school’s administrator. The trust and relational depth engendered by the rural school space and embedded in the school community created the conditions for the team to engage meaningfully in leadership of the initiative.

The team at Douglas engaged in what Woods and Roberts (2018) described as deep-level collaboration characterized by “mutual support, a cohesive culture and sense of belonging and an embedded commitment to discussion and critical examination of pedagogy, educational aims and ways of enhancing teacher’s practice” (p. 5). This deep-level collaboration resulted in a process of leadership that was shared during the implementation of the initiative, as all the parties to the practice of leadership brought something to the table. The practice lens of leadership expands our understanding of leadership beyond what is done by the positional leader. This perspective also challenges dyadic shared models of leadership that depict followers as looking to the positional leader to be told what to do, instead illustrating that the leadership process happens organically and can emerge from any member of a team engaged in leadership work.

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, we explored how leadership happened during the implementation of an improvement initiative in a rural Saskatchewan school. The findings show that leadership was shared and manifested during problem-solving opportunities that arose during the implementation of the initiative. School members were highly invested in the school improvement effort because they felt a sense of responsibility to the families in the community. Some teachers experienced the school’s earlier brush with closure, and as a result, they understood how important it was to work collaboratively and innovatively to be sustainable. The collective vision did not necessitate viewing leadership as a property invested in a single leader, particularly since over the years formal leaders changed more often than many of the staff. The consequences of the changing rural school landscape and facing the possibility of closure fostered an ingrained, innovative spirit of collaboration in which doing things differently and together had become a collaborative leadership norm in this rural school. To that end, this study contributes to the scholarship of rural school education by highlighting the significant role that the rural context plays in supporting shared forms of leadership necessary for

implementing complex school improvement initiatives such as the personalized and blended learning project undertaken at Douglas School.

The leadership of the initiative was driven by the experiences and expertise of all school actors engaged in the implementation of the project as they collectively determined how to best meet the needs of students. The leadership-as-practice perspective illuminated rural teachers' vital contributions to the leadership process during the implementation of the improvement initiative. Given the importance of leadership in implementing school improvement projects and the significance of these initiatives to the continued operation of rural schools, this study offers valuable insight into how leadership work can be collaboratively organized and accomplished in cultures of trust when it uplifts the gifts, experiences, and knowledge of all individuals who contribute to school improvement initiatives.

Leadership was shared during the implementation of Douglas School's improvement initiative. From a policy and practical perspective, this finding has implications for the ways in which leadership development unfolds in rural schools more broadly. Generally, leadership development often follows a one-size-fits-all approach in which the school principal goes off site for leadership training. Indeed, Hardwick-Franco (2019) called for rural school principal professional development to be tailored to their specific rural context. Although there is value in learning about the unique role of the principal and general leadership concepts and strategies, leadership development that is absent from context or is leader-centric is insufficient for supporting leadership work in rural schools. From a leadership-as-practice perspective, leadership education should be embedded in context, and it should facilitate the development of all staff members to strengthen the collective leadership capacity of the school. This approach to leadership development necessitates alignment and collaboration between school or district programming and university programming so that leadership development can be informed not only by research and theory but also be situated in the school context and involve all actors engaged in the collaborative work of leadership. Though such an approach would be complex, it also has the potential to be much more effective for strengthening the conditions for effective rural school leadership.

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Appendix: Team Meeting Overview

Meeting	Overview	Participants
Meeting A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First project update meeting, held during the first month of the school year - Held during a professional development day - At this meeting the team discussed the specifics of how self-directed time (SDT) would roll out and who would work with which groups of students during this period of the day; an approach to facilitate more transition time for students between SDT and physical education class as well as the successes and challenges experienced so far with the partial implementation of the initiative. 	Denise, Carrene, Marie, Dahlia, Shawna, Carla, Karen, and Tamika
Meeting B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second project update meeting held in the second week of the second month of the school year. At the time of the meeting the initiative had been fully implemented for a week with the focus of self-directed time shifting to the completion of tasks from English language arts (ELA) or math, under the supervision of a few teachers. - Meeting was called to discuss how the teachers had been experiencing SDT to date. - In preparation for the meeting teachers gathered feedback from students about their experience with SDT. The meeting started with this feedback; teachers also shared their experiences with SDT to date. - The team made decisions on strategies that could be used to keep students on task in SDT as well as some classroom management issues. 	Stacy, Tamika, Denise, Shawna, Carrene, Marie Karen, Dahlia, and Carla
Meeting C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impromptu meeting held during one of the teachers' daily afterschool collaborations in the third month of the school year. - The meeting was held in response to challenges experienced with SDT. The teachers decided that they would put strategies in place to assist students who were struggling to self-regulate during SDT. - The principal was not in attendance at this meeting. - Dahlia took the initiative to compile a document, "Dahlia's Notes," which categorized challenges faced along with possible means of addressing them. This document served as an agenda providing structure for the meeting. 	Dahlia, Carla, Tamika, Shawna, Stacy, and Carrene
Meeting D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Third project update meeting held during a professional development day in the third month during the implementation of the project. - Three team members were missing. - Teachers discussed the general direction in which SDT was going. - Two members of the ELA team shared a synopsis of the planned changes they were going to discuss in their ELA meeting later in the day. 	Denise, Dahlia, Stacy, Carrene, Marie, and Lisa
Meeting E	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ELA team project meeting held after the general team meeting - Three of the teachers were present in person, the fourth teacher joined via phone - In the ELA team meeting the teachers used a document that was compiled by one teacher as an agenda to guide their discussion, "Dahlia's Notes." - The teachers discussed adjustments to the way in which ELA would be offered to improve the student experience 	Dahlia, Stacy and Marie; the fourth teacher, Tamika, - participated via phone