Purpose, passion and play
Exploring the construct of flourishing from the perspective of school principals

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify and elaborate on the construct of flourishing in schools as understood through the stories and explanations provided by a small group of public school principals. Framed within a positive organizational perspective, the specific objectives of this study are: to identify how school leaders understand and experience flourishing in their roles and in their schools; to explore the conditions, catalysts and/or galvanizing forces of flourishing in schools.

Design/methodology/approach – The researchers used an electronic Delphi survey to gain a qualitative description of the understandings and impressions of the construct of flourishing from the perspective of practicing school administrators in one school district in central British Columbia. Delphi responses were aggregated after each round and thematically analysed to determine patterns and trends for further examination through progressive iterations of the survey administered via e-mail. The final set of data were then analysed for patterns, trends and themes that were compared and contrasted against research findings in the literature underpinning the theoretical framework for this study.

Findings – While there was no single definition of what it means to flourish in the work of school leadership, shared descriptions from these principals indicated that they feel a sense of flourishing when they are working together with teachers from a sense of purpose and passion and in a spirit of play to cultivate learning climates that reflect a shared ownership for improving educational experiences for students. These initial findings provoke thinking about the potentials and benefits of shifting the focus of research and practice in educational leadership towards more positive, strengths-based perspectives.

Research limitations/implications – The sample size was small, and so generalizing findings beyond this study is unreasonable. Further, because the researchers separated participant information from responses in order to safeguard anonymity and to aggregate the responses to provide these back to participants for their further elaboration and reflections, they were unable to determine whether particular responses were connected to context (elementary or secondary, size of school, years of experience as an administrator), gender or other demographic factors. However, the use of the electronic Delphi instrument provided insights on engaging school principals in thoughtful inquiry as participants, while respecting the busy workload and time constraints associated with the work of school principals.

Practical implications – Attending to well-being in the work of leading schools is an under-researched area of educational leadership. This study is an example of how researching educational leadership from a positive, strengths-based, human development perspective may provide useful insights for supporting principals and other educators to notice, nurture and sustain a sense of flourishing in their work and across the school. While further research is needed to examine the construct of flourishing across a diverse range of school organizations, the findings from this study provoke thinking about the benefits of studying what goes well, what brings vitality and a more full sense of humanity in the work of leading school organizations.

Originality/value – The researchers use a new perspective for examining and explaining the phenomenon of flourishing in schools, a positive organizational research orientation. The use of this

strengths-based, positive, human development approach to examining the construct of flourishing from the perspective of school principals can offer new insights and strategies for attending to well-being as an integral part of the work of leading schools.

What does it mean to flourish as a school principal? What can we learn from inquiring into the positive emotional and social aspects of the work of school leaders? These questions reflect our interest in using a positive organizational perspective to carry out research with those who work in school organizations (Cherkowski and Walker, 2013a, b, 2014). This perspective aligns with a growing shift in psychology and organizational studies to frame research using phenomena and constructs such as resilience, compassion, hope, efficacy, self-determination and meaningfulness at work and in other areas of life. Research findings from the disciplines of both positive psychology and positive organization studies are useful as we join with others to bring these positive research intelligences into the field of education to study what works, what goes well, what supports and fosters a full sense of humanity through work and what brings vitality to people in school organizations.

In essence, this positive turn in research reflects an intentional shift away from deficit-oriented understandings of well-being (i.e. as merely the absence of illness) towards a positive understanding of well-being (i.e. as the presence of health). There is a growing base of research findings on the antecedents, benefits and consequences of positive emotions and feeling good (cf. Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2005; Seligman, 2002; Fredrickson, 2005, 2008). Increasingly, extant understandings of well-being include both hedonic aspects of feeling good (positive emotions) and more eudemonic aspects of living well. These include experiences of positive relationships, meaningfulness in life and work, together with senses of mastery and personal growth, as well as autonomy or achievement (Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Huta and Ryan, 2010; Keyes and Annas, 2009). This broader understanding of well-being, with emotional, psychological and social components, has been characterized in psychological research as flourishing and is recognized as experienced on a continuum (Keyes, 2002; Ryff and Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Although there are several measurements of flourishing that encompass both emotional aspects of feeling good and a more eudemonic notion of living well, the studies are generally conducted from a context-free perspective. There are relatively few studies that focus specifically on flourishing in workplaces (Mehrotra and Ravikesh, 2014), and seldom do these studies focus on flourishing in the context of leading school organizations.

From studies in positive psychology, flourishing is an individual trait and understood as optimal ways of functioning characterized by goodness and wholeness (Keyes, 2002; Fredrickson and Losada, 2005; Gable and Haidt, 2005). People who flourish experience the opposite of languishing, yearning for more, nor do they feel stuck in a rut (Keyes and Lopez, 2002). Individuals who flourish are more resilient and more closely approximate self-fulfilment, contentment and happiness (Haybron, 2008; Martin and Marsh, 2006; Rassmussen, 1999; Seligman, 2011). In the absence of an agreed upon definition of flourishing in school contexts, we conceptualize flourishing in schools as a complex construct that includes aspects of emotional (feeling good) and psychological and social well-being (living well) in the work of teaching and learning.

Through our positive research perspective, we aim to contribute a definition of flourishing applied to education contexts as a way of gaining insight into a fuller sense of the human experience inside the work of teaching, learning and leading. In this paper, we present findings from a small Delphi study wherein we aimed to gain an understanding of the nature of flourishing in schools from the perspective of formal school leaders. The specific objectives of this particular study were to identify how school leaders understood what it meant to flourish at work, how they described their experiences of flourishing in their roles and in their schools, and we also explored the conditions, catalysts and galvanizing forces of flourishing in school cultures. In this paper, we provide an overview of the theoretical framework for this study, a description of the main themes emerging from the Delphi survey data, followed by a discussion of our findings.

Our interdisciplinary theoretical framework

We locate our research in the fields of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship (POS). With this interdisciplinary theoretical framework we establish a focus on the positive, generative and life-enhancing aspects of the work of teaching and leading in schools, moving away from a tendency to focus research on deficits, gaps and shortcomings and aligned with the growing body of research in the science of positive development (cf. Cameron and Caza, 2004; Carr, 2004; Diener, 2000; Seligman, 2002, 2011).

Positive psychology is a growing field of research designed to examine the development of positive outlooks, habits and mental models with a focus on studying and describing positive qualities in individuals rather than aiming to repair the negative and destructive ones (Ben-Shahar, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Positive psychologists study the conditions, strengths and virtues that enable individuals to thrive (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Keyes *et al.*, 2012; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The science of positivity has focused predominantly on emotional well-being, measuring constructs such as happiness and optimism (Diener, 2000; Seligman, 2002). From these studies, we know that happiness is a fluid state that can be improved or increased with the use of various practices and behaviours such as acts of kindness, positive goal setting, practicing gratitude and positive reflection on past experiences (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Findings from positive psychology are increasingly used to support establishing positive education practices and environments in schools (Seligman *et al.*, 2009).

The complimentary field of POS emerged from positive psychology to focus on positive traits, attributes, behaviours, processes and practices in organizational contexts (Carr, 2004; Gallos, 2008; Luthans and Youssef, 2007; Pace, 2010; Roberts and Dutton, 2009; Wright, 2003). POS researchers study "the dynamics leading to the development of human strength, producing resilience and restoration, fostering vitality, and cultivating extraordinary individual and organizational performance" (Cameron and Caza, 2004, p. 3). POS researchers do not deny the struggles and challenges of work in organizations, nor do they ignore the negative and even toxic organizational environments that are experienced by many individuals in organizations (Gallos, 2008). POS research tends to examine the full human experience of those within organizations, both the trauma and the triumph (Maitlis, 2009), but with an emphasis on happiness and organizational health (Achor, 2011; Lencioni, 2012), meaningfulness at work (Rosso *et al.*, 2010), the role and influence of compassion (Lillius *et al.*, 2008) and other human capacities and capabilities. Our theoretical framework is also influenced by the work of organizational scholars who

examine the fullness of the human experience within the organization, but who are not aligned nominally to the field of POS. For example, Margaret Wheatley (2005) is one such scholar who argued that in the future "those organizations who will succeed are those that evoke our greatest human capacities – our need to be in good relationships, and our desire to contribute to something beyond ourselves" (p. 124). We contend that the interdisciplinary insights from positive psychology and positive organizational studies provide promise for those seeking to explore how and why those in schools and their leaders flourish.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of practicing school leaders' experiences and understanding of flourishing in their work of leading schools. Our preliminary research questions were:

RQ1. What can practicing school leaders tell us about their understandings and experiences of flourishing in their work and in their schools (including identifying and benchmarking indicators of flourishing schools)?

RQ2. In what ways do leaders encourage and sustain flourishing in their schools?

To answer these questions, and in keeping with the emergent nature of our research design (McMillan, 2002), we used an electronic Delphi survey to gain access to the stories, experiences and interpretations of the concept of flourishing among a group of school leaders. Delphi surveys consist of progressive iterations in which data are synthesized after each iteration, and then further elaborations, interpretations or extensional insights are requested from original participants. The use of an electronic Delphi survey enabled us to gather a maximum number of individual opinions on a topic without the need to bring participants physically together to discuss the topic (Dillman, 2007). The approach allowed for the collective wisdom of a group to surface through the various iterations of the survey.

Participants in this study were practicing school administrators in one school district in central British Columbia. This district is typical of those outside of the main urban centres in this Canadian province, with several small to medium-sized rural schools (100-300 students) located across the district, a few larger elementary and middle schools (300-500 students), and one large secondary school (1,000 students) located in the main urban area that has a population of about 25,000 people. E-mail invitations to participate were sent to the 28 administrators of the elementary and secondary schools in this district. To encourage a strong return rate for the surveys, we sent a second e-mail to all potential participants two days after the first e-mail to further encourage their participation. Although we were hoping for a higher response rate, we ended up with a 43 per cent response rate (12/28) for the first round of surveys. Unfortunately, this rate of return dropped even further during the second round of interviews to only 21 per cent (6/28). Given this decline in the second round, we did not proceed with a third iteration of the survey. We know that most principals are fully engaged in their work and that attending to surveys is perhaps perceived as one more task on their unending lists. We were highly encouraged by the apparent sincerity, quality and depth of the responses we did receive from those participants who were able to take the time to reflect on their practice and experiences of work in schools.

Once received, responses were immediately removed from identifying data (e-mail replies) so there were no connections between specific responses received and

particular respondents. We solicited only brief general demographic information from participants (role in the school and years in that role) and so we know that respondents are principals in elementary and secondary schools and have a range of experience in that role from 1 to 28 years. We developed the questions for the Delphi instrument from an appreciative inquiry perspective (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010) consistent with our stated research orientation of inviting participants to notice and describe what works well, gives them a sense of satisfaction, meaning, purpose, happiness and what makes them feel alive in their work. For example, the first question in round one was: think to a time when you experienced contentment, happiness, a sense of meaning and purpose, maybe even joy and bliss at work. Tell us a story that you would say describes or captures these experiences in your work: what was going on for you during that time? What were you and others doing to contribute to these feelings? How often do these moments occur? How do these moments make you feel about your work and others you work with? Participants e-mailed their responses as written text, ranging from three to five lines of text, 8 to 12 lines of text and several longer paragraphs that were 20-30 lines of text. Their written narrative responses are the data used for this study.

Data were inductively analysed using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Johnson and Christensen, 2012) whereby each item of information was classified into categories that gradually emerged as the data were examined. Patterns, trends and categories were formed, re-formed and adjusted with the accumulation of the related data (McMillan, 2002). Some initial themes that emerged from the first round were: being adaptable and resilient; creating environments where it feels safe to make mistakes in the pursuit of learning; occurring when teachers and leaders work together; dependent on creating atmospheres of trust, strong collegiality and a sense of fun and play at work. We built on these themes in the second round and asked participants to think about specific ways they attend to flourishing as they understand it, and how they create conditions in the school for flourishing to happen. Trends from the responses from that second round reflected a reiteration of the need for trust, for building strong relationships at work, and for creating spaces for teachers and students to feel safe to take risks in their learning. The three themes that emerged from an analysis of both rounds were: the importance of working together towards a common purpose; the desire for creating a safe environment for risk taking in learning; and the importance of creating an environment of play and fun at work. These are described in more detail in the next section.

There were limitations to this study. The sample size was small, and so generalizing findings beyond this study is unreasonable. Further, because we separated participant information from responses in order to safeguard anonymity and to aggregate the responses to provide these back to participants for their further elaboration and reflections, we were unable to determine whether particular responses were connected to context (elementary or secondary, size of school, years of experience as an administrator), gender or other demographic factors.

Our findings
Most of the responses indicated that flourishing environments were ones that hosted a strong sense of working together towards a common purpose, where there was evidence of a strong passion for helping students learn and an atmosphere of team playfulness and excitement. Although we will present these three themes in separate sections, the stories revealed that each theme interacts and overlaps to create a sense a

flourishing in school workplaces. Moreover, the participants described their understanding of flourishing, but acknowledged that, for them, flourishing is often "magical", and "hard to quantify". We aimed to have them put into words what is often impossible to describe, but is commonly felt during their work in their schools. Although the participants may have been challenged to put into words their understanding of flourishing in their work, they were able to reflect on it as "deeply rewarding and satisfying". One of the binding threads through the responses was the belief that a deep and lasting impression can be felt when a sense of flourishing has been evoked among educators and across the learning community. In the next section we describe the three themes that emerged from the stories: working together towards a common purpose; creating a safe space where the passion for teaching can emerge; and engaging a sense of playfulness at work.

Towards a common purpose
Working together towards a common purpose of helping all children to learn and grow emerged out of the stories as a shared theme for how these participants experience a sense of flourishing in their work. They described that this feeling of working together towards this important common purpose often seemed to create an emotional bond among teachers. Having this sense of collective action towards a shared purpose helped them to navigate through challenging times and in difficult work situations, and contributed to a feeling of fulfillment and meaning in the work of leading their schools. For example, one principal described a sense of being fulfilled at work:

> [When I think of flourishing I think of stories] when we achieved a common and expressed sense of purpose, vision, and plan of action. As a principal, a story that comes to mind is when all our staff (after months of collaboration about how to deal with a cohort of students that was less than motivated) agreed that "it was our problem," agreeing upon a long-term vision of what it would look like if we were successful, and we agreed upon short and long-term action plans. There were frustrations, things that didn't work, and regular celebrations of things that worked well. It drew us together as a complete staff both professionally and socially.

For some of the respondents, finding a way to describe the desire for common action towards a shared purpose was done through a negative example – how they had experienced their work in the absence of this collective sense of working for a common purpose. For example, one respondent shared an experience of feeling the fragility, and even the mystery, of developing a sense of shared ownership for school improvement:

> I would say that the school I am in right now has some aspects that are flourishing, but they are happening more at the individual teacher level than the school level. In order to start flourishing, the trust in administrators needs to be increased and the belief that teacher initiatives will be supported needs to be increased. I think that this is more of an art than a science. I have seen so many administrators kill schools and so few of them help the schools to flourish that I would say the biggest support a school can have is an administrator who does not put their ego ahead of the school and instead helps to build the confidence of their staff. They need to do this by guiding not by pushing, by building capacity for leadership within the staff not by directing everything. If a staff truly embraces a sense of ownership and pride where a school's success is concerned and feels that they are given due credit for their contributions and efforts, the system starts to support itself.

The sense that flourishing was connected to working together towards a common purpose included a number of expressions of desire for sharing leadership for purposes

of school improvement in the learning community. This sense of leading together towards the common purpose and helping everyone learn and grow was seen as an essential aspect of flourishing in schools.

The respondents shared stories of the positive impact on their work brought about by celebrating the school's successes and also caring for each other in difficult times, in a community where all members felt they belonged and worked together. One principal's story captures this feeling of deep care for one another:

> It snowed the night before. So I woke up early to head to school to shovel the school walkways as I do on snow mornings, to have the walkways and stairs clear for students and staff. When I arrived the walkways were done. I soon discovered that a grade 5 boy had come to the school after the snowfall the night before and shoveled, because, he said, "Mr. N always does it for us, and I wanted to do something for him." It wasn't reading, writing or math, but somehow I think something even bigger was now part of "who we are as a school."

For this respondent, flourishing included experiences of care and consideration extended across the school community.

Creating safe spaces

According to the respondents in this study, there was a sense of flourishing when, together, teachers and students engaged in taking risks in their learning, innovating in their teaching and "opening their doors to the outside world". The respondents' descriptions reflected a belief that creating a safe climate for teachers and students to make mistakes was essential to a sense of flourishing as a principal. The importance of establishing trust was a recurring theme in the responses. One principal described a related perspective:

> The first thing I usually notice about a flourishing school is the relaxed and comfortable way that staff interact with each other. It is a comfortable environment where jokes are common and taken in a positive manner. It is a place where risks are taken safely and without fear of personal criticism. When this trust is utilized by the staff to push each other outside of their comfort zones by engaging in research-supported practices, I believe the school is flourishing.

The principals acknowledged the important work of creating a climate of learning where students and teachers felt safe to experiment and explore alternate ways of teaching and learning. Moreover, creating this safe place for teacher learning was an important aspect of helping teachers to see the possibilities for innovating in their work. One principal noted, "a culture exists here which allows for risk taking and confidence building. People are innovative and open to trying different things". Part of what was shared in the stories from these principals is that the work of creating trust in schools can be a rewarding personal experience, giving them a deeper sense of meaning in their own work.

For some of the respondents, flourishing happened when the climate reflected a sense of love for the work, no matter how hard that work was. For example, one principal provided this description:

> When I worked at my toughest school (inner city, tough kids, incredibly low socio-economics), our mission as the admin team was to make the school "the best place that you'll ever work at. You will move on to different work but always look back to how much fun it was here" – even when it meant tears during the day, fights in the classrooms, swearing, etc. etc., the staff indeed dusted themselves off each afternoon and looked forward to coming back the next day.

This sense of framing the work of teaching as an opportunity to engage in satisfying and fun challenges seemed to be an important aspect of sustaining energy and interest in ongoing improvement for student learning.

Play, laughter and joy
The third theme that emerged from the stories of these principals was the importance of laughter, joy, and play as integral to how these school leaders defined flourishing. As a general description, one principal described moments of flourishing as "[…] happy times, lots of laughter, lots of support for each other". There was a sense among the respondents that flourishing was about feeling good in their work at school as individuals and as a community, and that this sense of feeling good often spilled over into other areas of their lives and vice versa. One principal recounted the memory of a particular feeling of flourishing as a triad of experiences of a sense of achievement as a teacher, of a sense of closeness with colleagues, and a sense of well-being in aspects of life outside of work:

> I have experienced these feelings various times during my career as a teacher and an administrator. My favourite year as a teacher was probably when the basketball team I was coaching was ranked in the top ten in the Province, I had two of my 18 Math 12 students get 100% on their Provincial exams and I had a lot of close friends on staff with whom I spent a lot of time. I felt this year to be rewarding both because of the positive contributions I believed I was making to students' lives and because I was feeling really balanced in my life outside of work.

Another respondent echoed this sense of individual and collective well-being in how flourishing in school was described:

> I believe I work in a flourishing school. It is not a perfect school by any stretch, but every day I see people who are positive and passionate about what they do. They get down and frustrated like anybody, but they are masters at shaking it off because at the end of the day they love what they do […] and there is definitely a culture of fun and sense of humour which supports the flourishing that takes place.

Another principal shared:

> I have always sought "happiness at work" – for myself and those around me. I have experienced that when people are happy in their work (due to positive interactions with colleagues, simple things like fresh coffee and occasional treats, and a supportive culture within the school) that the work becomes "fun" no matter how difficult the work is.

This belief in the benefit of creating conditions for teachers to experience positive emotions at work is reflected in current research in psychology where experiencing positive emotions in one area of life can broaden and build capacities in other areas as well (Fredrickson, 2008).

Discussion: what do these findings mean for school leaders?
From the stories and related insights of these school leaders we have been able to glean initial understandings about what it means to flourish in schools from the perspectives of this small group of principals. Flourishing in the work of leading seemed to be about creating conditions for teachers, students and others in the school to work together towards shared goals in climates of care, connection, trust, innovation and improvement, fun and laughter. This finding reflects descriptions in learning organization and learning community literature about the importance of an interdependent ethic of care necessary for creating safe spaces for teachers to learn about their practice with the goal of improving student learning (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hord and Sommers, 2008; Mitchell and Sackney, 2009; Sergiovanni, 1994; Stoll and Louis, 2007). The stories from our respondents highlight that this ethic of care can be both intellectual and visceral; this feeling of care extends between teachers and students, it can create energy and motivation that enriches academic learning and makes an impact in how the community

works together towards common goals of improved student outcomes. From this small group of respondents we can describe flourishing, in part, as a sense of purpose for ongoing improvement of educational experiences for students by creating a school community of care, connectedness and trust where teachers feel engaged to share in the work of leading together for school improvement.

The notion of organizing schools as learning communities for the purposes of improving educational achievement for all students remains an important focus in educational leadership research and practice. As schools and leaders are faced with mounting pressure to better offer educational experiences that prepare all students for the demands of the knowledge society, finding new approaches to school improvement and effectiveness that are more adaptive, responsive and particular to context is increasingly important (Chapman *et al.*, 2011; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Sackney and Walker, 2007; Townsend, 2007). The role of school leaders for building the capacity necessary for establishing and supporting a professional learning climate and culture in schools is an important element in the success of learning communities as currently described (Hord and Sommers, 2008; Leithwood, 2006; Robinson, 2007; Slater, 2008). In this paper we argue that shifting the focus of attention towards a positive, generative and life-enhancing leadership perspective may offer new opportunities for thinking about the work of school principals in terms of establishing flourishing school climates and cultures for improving educational achievement. Building on research findings from other disciplines, we see how positive psychology and POS provides insight about how to increase well-being and improve a sense of flourishing at work and in life. This, we claim, can lead to a slight re-framing of the work of school leadership. School leaders focus on fostering their own and others' flourishing. They give careful attention to making space for healthy relationships and vibrant (life giving) climates and cultures. We suggest that this subtle shift offers new insights and opportunities for enriching the ways principals, teachers and others in the school work together towards ongoing improvement of educational experiences for all those in the school community.

The principals in this study described the challenges and hard work of teaching and how they worked to mitigate these difficulties through building strong relationships and climates of trust and care. Trust has been identified in the research literature as an essential piece of school climate, a precursor to improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Walker *et al.*, 2011). In positive organizational research trust is an essential element of building high-quality relationships at work (Carmeli *et al.*, 2009; Dutton, 2003). An interesting aspect of these principals' descriptions of their work entailed the expressed insights that part of building trust was also about finding ways to join together as a staff to frame the work of teaching and learning from a stance of fun and joy. In this way, building trust was explained as an important element in establishing climates where teachers can feel a sense of safety to try out new approaches and engage in new ways of working together in order to improve their teaching.

Their understanding of the role and importance of trust in establishing a healthy professional learning climate echoes the findings in the current research on trust in schools (cf. Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Walker *et al.*, 2011). Their descriptions of building climates of trust and care also reflect a holistic understanding of the work of teaching, a perspective in which the work of teaching calls upon a full range of emotional, psychological and social experiences. This holistic notion of teaching resonates with findings from Day's (2004) research on the work lives of teachers where he noted the importance of maintaining passion in the work of teaching, of acknowledging the need for self-fulfilment through this work, and for engaging minds, hearts and bodies

as an imperative for sustaining passion in the work of teaching (Nias, 1996 as cited in Day, 2004). Similarly, findings from research on meaning at work show that creating opportunities for employees to craft their work in ways that elicit a sense of meaningfulness, purpose or calling improves job satisfaction (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2013). Research findings on strengths-based leadership approaches show how leaders can positively impact the climate at work as they help employees to focus on working from passions and strengths (Rath and Conchie, 2008).

From the descriptions of the principals in this study, we understand that a sense of flourishing in the work of leading schools means finding ways for teachers to engage in their work from a perspective of passion, engagement and a love for their work of helping students to learn. Similarly, Starratt (2011) argued for a model of education that places human development at the heart of teaching and learning in such a way that the teachers' work is to engage students in learning that makes full use of both the mind and the heart to engage a broader awareness of what it means to be fully human on a learning journey. An important aspect of focusing on human development as a principal then is working with teachers to cultivate professional learning climates that promote meaningful and growth-oriented professional learning opportunities. As teachers engage in the passion of their learning, they can transfer these experiences to the classroom and work with engaging students in their passions as part of the learning experience (Starratt, 2011). This idea of recognizing positive learning experiences as generative, leading to creating further positive experiences, is reiterated in research on positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2008). While the influence of emotions in the work of leading schools has received some research attention (Crawford, 2009; Hargreaves, 2001; Leithwood and Beatty, 2007), more can be learned about the generative influences of positive emotions on professional learning and learning communities by using findings from research in positive psychology to bring these intelligences to the field of education.

As an example, the findings from positive psychology on conditions and states of mind necessary for deep engagement and high levels of satisfaction in activities and learning can be useful for thinking about professional learning in schools as we think about how the principals in this study described flourishing as experiencing their work from a stance of play, laughter and joy. The psychological state of flow emanates from joy and is produced when individuals demonstrate an intense and focused concentration, a sense of losing track of time, a loss of self-consciousness, a feeling of control of one's actions and environment, and high levels of intrinsic satisfaction while engaged in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Seligman, 2011). Fredrickson's (2008) broaden and build theory of positive emotions described how experiencing positive feelings in one area of work can open up possibilities for positive experiences in other areas of work and life. This was described by the one respondent in our study who talked about the memorable year when positive events at work and in his private life combined to create a confluence of flourishing.

Research on play and positive behaviours at school has tended to focus on the benefits of play for students (Goouch, 2008) with little research focusing on the benefits of play in the work of teachers. From the business literature, play at work has had modest attention in research and writing (i.e. Pink, 2010), where studies show that the positive physiological and psychological benefits of play can likely transfer to the work environment if employees are able to engage their work from a perspective of play. More research on the role of play in the work of school leadership could provide new insights on how to notice, nurture and sustain flourishing for principals and for others in the school community.

There has been some attention paid to the importance of well-being in the work of teaching. For example, in his extensive research on the work lives of teachers, Day (2004) and Day *et al.* (2007) indicated the connections between teachers' sense of efficacy and commitment and their feelings of well-being and resilience capabilities. Day *et al.* (2007) recommended that policy-makers ensure provision for personnel support structures to "address the associations between teachers' well-being, and their commitment, self-efficacy and resilience" (p. 238). We see a similar need to address the connections between well-being and the work of leading schools. We know from research in positive psychology about interventions that can increase personal feelings of well-being, such as gratitude journals, use of constructive language and re-framing work from a positive, strengths-based orientation (Achor, 2011; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2011). We see how these practices may already be used by principals in their work, as noted in the stories from our respondents, and suggest growing the research on how a focus on these sorts of practices may be useful for fostering and supporting well-being and resilience among those who teach, lead and learn in schools. Further, teacher education and leadership development programs could become the initial point for conversation and practice about the kinds of practices and habits of mind that support a sense of flourishing in self and others in the work of teaching, learning and leading schools (Cherkowski and Walker, 2013b).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the capacity for educational leaders to enliven a sense of flourishing in themselves and their learning community is an important, yet under-researched, aspect of educational leadership. One of the aims of this study was to establish a definition of flourishing from the perspective of school principals. As we engaged more deeply with the data, we noticed that there is no clear definition that we can share. Indeed, the idea of a messy, murky and, sometimes, elusive understanding of flourishing underpinned the stories we heard from the leaders in this study. We noticed that there seemed to be a common thread of trust, care, and a sense of shared leadership for achieving common goals for student learning and achievement that ran through the stories of how our respondents described flourishing. From the stories and descriptions we noted that a sense of flourishing seemed to emanate from a strong purpose, a sense of passion, and a feeling of play in the work of cultivating school climates where teachers feel their own sense of purpose, passion and play at work. The findings provoke us to think about how shifting the focus of research and practice in educational leadership towards more positive, strengths-based perspectives might provide new ways and spaces for principals to work with teachers to cultivate professional learning climates where the fullness of their humanity can be expressed through engaging their hearts, minds and bodies in the work of teaching, learning and leading in schools.

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