

**SIX KEYS TO SUCCESS:
PROMOTING EARLY LEARNING THROUGH AUTHENTIC,
SHARED, AND RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP**

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Introduction

Begley (2001) includes within the concept of authentic leadership the capacity for inclusive, creative, and visionary responsiveness to social circumstances. The purpose of this article is to contribute to knowledge about authentic leadership in a multi-agency partnership that generated parent, teacher, school, and community participation and collaboration to improve transitions to school and literacy development in pre-school children. The article stems from mixed method, case study research commissioned by The Learning Partnership (TLP) into the 2006 implementation of the Welcome to Kindergarten (WTK) program in the North Bay area of Ontario, Canada. The results pertain only to the case in point; however they argue for a need for further research and, by resonating with existing literature and the experience of readers, may have a wider relevance.

The authors conducted two phenomenological studies of the same North Bay case. The resulting research reports (Wideman & Campbell, 2006; Campbell, Elliott-Johns, & Wideman, 2008) were submitted to TLP and are available to interested readers on-line. The initial study was an evaluation of the 2006 implementation of WTK based on the perceptions of participants. Everyone who participated in the WTK project, including parents, families, community agencies, and educators, was invited to complete questionnaires; then local organizers arranged focus-group interviews with representation from all of the groups. This initial study found two unexpected success indicators in the first year of implementation that caught the attention of the researchers and of TLP. The first was an overwhelming level of enthusiasm for and participation in the program among teachers, families, and representatives of community agencies. The second was the very high level of collaboration that developed among schools, area school boards, and community agencies. These results were considered so striking that The Learning Partnership commissioned a second research study (Campbell, Elliott-Johns, & Wideman, 2008) to see what had occurred in North Bay that might have contributed to the high levels of enthusiasm, participation, and interagency collaboration that were observed and reported. As the Director of Programs for TLP Canada put it, "We want you to find out, *What was the magic?*"

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This paper focuses on the results of the second study. It begins by providing background to the project. A review of related literature follows, as well as an outline of the WTK implementation in North Bay. Then the methodology and results of the research study are presented. The paper ends with conclusions and implications pertinent to generating multi-agency partnerships (Cheminais, 2009) in the education of young children. Significant implications involve the importance of local leadership and decision-making in the introduction and continued growth of multi-agency initiatives as well as the importance of flexible, shared, and responsive leadership at both the local and central levels.

The study may contribute to ongoing discussion of how to address top-down/bottom-up tensions (Hunt, 1987; Fullan, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009) that continue to challenge educational change. It may also have implications for early literacy development and the ongoing development of Kindergarten including, for example, the current expansion to full-day learning for Ontario four and five year olds (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2010).

The Context of the Research

This section presents background information about The Learning Partnership (TLP), its national Welcome to Kindergarten Program (WTK), and the North Bay area. TLP (www.thelearningpartnership.ca) describes itself as “a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to championing a strong public education system in Canada through innovative programs, credible research, policy initiatives, executive leadership and public engagement” (The Learning Partnership, 2010a). WTK is one of the Learning Partnership’s core programs and is designed to better prepare young children for transition to Kindergarten. The Learning Partnership describes WTK as follows:

(B)efore starting kindergarten, three and four year old children are given preparatory resources and experiences to position them for school success and lifelong learning. Parents/caregivers and children are invited to attend a Welcome to Kindergarten orientation at their neighbourhood school where they receive the early learning resources in the Welcome to Kindergarten Bag and learn strategies for using the resources at home. At the orientation, families connect with kindergarten teachers, school resource personnel and staff from community support agencies. These early years educators provide training on why family-planned activity using the resources in the Welcome to Kindergarten Bag will help their children be better prepared for school and learning” (The Learning Partnership, 2010b).

North Bay (www.city.north-bay.on.ca) is a city of 54,000, located on Lake Nipissing in northeastern Ontario. The population of the city and its surrounding area is mostly Anglophone, with a thriving minority of Francophones, and Native Canadians, mostly Ojibwe. The city and its surrounding area are served by four district school boards, English-and French-language, Public and Roman Catholic. Prior to the

introduction of WTK, the area had become concerned about low literacy scores as measured by pre-school literacy screening (Early Identification Measures) and Grade 3 and 6 Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing which focuses primarily on print literacy and mathematical skills.

Local Implementation of the WTK Program

WTK was launched in the North Bay area in 2006 and continues to operate annually at the time of writing in 2010. All four district school boards agreed to participate. As in other jurisdictions across the country, TLP requested that implementation be guided by a national framework of expectations. The framework indicates that WTK schools are to include community agencies in teacher training and parent/child orientation activities. TLP wanted WTK to be a community-based project. As one TLP national manager put it, “Our whole premise was that we had a program to provide, but you’re the people who know your community best and we need to hear from you. You need to give us direction as to what will happen...”

Together, TLP personnel (two leaders from the TLP central office in Toronto, Ontario and two local leaders hired from the North Bay education community) and the four directors of education made three decisions that shaped the WTK project in North Bay. The first was to invite community agencies supporting families with young children to partner in the project and to participate fully in WTK events. The second was to make WTK available to all families with children about to enter school by integrating WTK into the already occurring school orientation sessions held each spring following Kindergarten registration. The third decision was to establish an annual “Let the Learning Begin” (LTLB) community conference on early learning and literacy development, for all parents, caregivers, and their pre-school children.

Three components of the North Bay WTK Program were also identified—professional development workshops, WTK family orientation sessions, and the LTLB family conference. Together these three kinds of activities formed the basis of a comprehensive early literacy and numeracy program designed locally to reach all families with pre-schoolers.

Introductory professional development workshops were held in the spring, 2006, for teachers, principals, and community partners (e.g., children’s librarians and community health agencies). These workshops were sponsored, organized, and led by the two local TLP leaders and focused on the WTK program. They included presentations by school-board personnel and community partners, and demonstrations of effective early childhood education practices.

WTK orientation sessions were conducted for families, caregivers, and their pre-school children in May and June, 2006. The sessions were held at the individual schools and representatives of the various community agencies were invited to participate. At the orientation sessions, the WTK resource bags of early learning resources provided by TLP were distributed to each family. The WTK bag included magnetic letters and numbers, crayons, pencils, glue, scissors, three children’s books, art paper, writing paper, play dough, and a parent suggestion sheet entitled, “Help your child get ready for

school.” There were hands-on demonstrations for parents, caregivers, and children showing how to engage in the activities at home over the summer months. In addition, parents, caregivers, and their children worked together at interactive learning stations to practice using the materials.

The annual LTLB community conference for parents, caregivers, and their pre-school children was first held in October 2006 at a local secondary school. The two local TLP leaders and a committee of volunteers representing various community agencies organized the half-day conference. TLP, local individuals, and businesses provided funding. The conferences presented in French and English a variety of speakers and interactive workshop sessions on early literacy and learning. Most families attended two or three sessions, and were able to visit booths and exhibits set up by district school boards and community partner agencies.

Related Research and Current Practice

This section presents information on some relevant literature pertaining to early literacy and numeracy initiatives involving parents and community, and to leadership in multi-agency partnerships.

Naturalistic research over the last twenty years has clearly demonstrated that the family is a rich resource for supporting children’s literacy development across socioeconomic and cultural contexts (Anderson, Strelasky, & Anderson, 2007; Wohlwend, 2008). Early literacy and numeracy initiatives, involving parents and the broader community, have long been recognized as beneficial to young children in their preparation for positive and successful transitions to school (Heath, 1983; Hill, 1989, Elliott-Johns, 1999; Mustard & McCain, 1999, 2002; Bouchard, 2004; Wideman, & Campbell, 2006; Mustard, McCain, & Shanker, 2007). More recently, Hands (2008, 2010) has explored the rationale for educators’ cultivation of community involvement in schools and the benefits of collaboration in effective school-community partnerships.

Currently, the Ministry of Education in Ontario is implementing a “Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program” based largely on the works of Charles Pascal (2009) and Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain (1999, 2002), all of whom are high-profile advocates of early learning for young children. The program promotes the belief that “Partnerships with parents and communities strengthen the ability of Early Learning Programs to meet the needs of young children.” (Pascal, 2009)

Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan (2002) see multi-agency, integrated services for young children and their families rapidly becoming part of the new policy landscape in education. For example, Pelletier & Corter (2005) pilot tested an early childhood integrated services model that sought to meet the needs of diverse families in the Toronto region. Their findings clearly underscored the need for teachers to foster and sustain partnerships with families in which the school is the hub of the community.

Recent emphasis in the UK on “multi-agency partnerships” (Cheminais, 2009) supports the efficacy of combining community and educational resources in the interests of early learning:

“Multi-agency partnership working is where practitioners from more than one agency work together jointly, sharing aims, information, tasks and responsibilities in order to intervene early to prevent problems arising which may impact on children’s learning and achievement. Multi-agency working involves the joint planning and delivery of co-ordinated services that are responsive to children and young people’s changing needs.” (p. 4)

In the literature, ways to build greater collaboration and shared leadership through school-community, multi-agency partnerships are often reflected in the practices of school leaders and teachers who demonstrate confidence and the collective capacity to make improvements (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Claxton, 2002; Noguera, 2003; Fullan, 2005). George (2003) states that, “authentic leaders genuinely desire to serve others through their leadership. They are more... interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference than they are in power, money or prestige for themselves... They are guided by qualities of the heart, passion and compassion, as they are by qualities of the mind.” (p. 12)

As indicated earlier, Begley (2001) includes in authentic leadership the capacity for inclusive, creative, and visionary responsiveness to social circumstances. Furman (2004) presents a strong argument for an ethic of community as a vehicle for synthesis of much of the current work on valuing the development of local autonomy, and conceptualizing processes of community. Furman’s analysis suggests that strategies for system and provincial leadership practices that inspire commitment to community processes are increasingly relevant to twenty-first century schools.

Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) write of school improvement resulting from the interaction of multiple institutions and individuals rather than the mere replication of reforms developed elsewhere (Snyder, Bolin, and Zumwalt, 1992). Interaction of institutions and individuals is required because “there is inevitable variation in how complex change initiatives are taken up in different communities” (Cortet et. al., 2008) (p. 792).

Johnston and Kirschner (1996) recognized that general factors may be identified that influence success in partnerships. However, they also expressed the view that since each partnership is unique, no magic formula for success exists. Johnson and Kirschner recommended studying individual examples of partnership as a means to identifying general factors.

Relational trust seems to be one general factor in the success of community-based partnerships (Bryk & Schnieder, 1996). Writing of their experience leading a multi-agency partnership project, Couture, Delong, and Wideman (1999) reported that trust influenced four factors that affected success. First there was a “clear and compelling cause and a history of collaboration that pre-dated the partnership.” Secondly, the relationship of the project leaders “was based on shared values, purposes, and collaborative skills that enabled (them) to resolve issues of power and voice.” Thirdly, the leaders “were able to influence decision making in (their) organizations.” Finally, the organizations “were

able to cut through red tape to translate their commitment into effective action.” (p. 1)

Methodology of the Study

The purpose of the study was to discover why WTK had been so successful in creating and sustaining widespread participation and successful collaborative partnerships among North Bay families, schools, and community agencies (Guy & Sutherland, 1996; Davies, 1997; Carlisle, Stanley, & Kemple, 2005). The study was conducted from September to December 2007 and was phenomenological in methodology. Phenomenological studies identify and describe the subjective experience of respondents and involve studying everyday experience from the subjects’ viewpoint (Schwandt, 2001). The researchers planned and implemented the methodology collaboratively with the national and local TLP leaders. Everyone who had been involved in the WTK project—parents, teachers, and community partners—were invited to participate in individual or focus group interviews based on open-ended questions. Since TLP personnel asked the researchers to find out “What was the magic in the North Bay area?” the questions used in the interviews focused on that question.

The national and local TLP leaders were interviewed individually. Three focus groups were held including Anglophone and Francophone participants. Ten parents chose to participate in the first group. Eighteen principals and teachers participated in the second. The third focus group included representatives of ten community agencies.

The individual and focus group interviews averaged approximately 50 minutes in length and were conversational (Kvale, 1996). The researchers asked questions, and listened carefully to participants’ responses (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. All participants were invited to send additional comments to the researchers in writing and some did so. Transcripts of the interviews of TLP leaders were sent to them for corroboration. In addition, all transcripts were cross-checked by the researchers for inter-rater agreement with the original recordings.

Transcriptions and written comments were analyzed collaboratively by the researchers. Data pages were coded. Passages of interest were highlighted, or marked with brackets, and detailed notes were added to the margins regarding emergent categories and themes. Brief conceptual memos were written for each interview describing: the important information provided in the interview; how the interview corresponded to themes emerging from the data; and, new ideas or potential questions for further exploration. These conceptual memos assisted in the development of collective understandings of emergent categories and themes in the data.

The search for, identification, and display of significant patterns and connections in the data was continual and iterative as the inductive, collaborative, data analysis process progressed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Annotated transcripts were photocopied and segments of the data considered pertinent to key research questions were identified, coded, and clustered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) using “look/feel alike” criteria consistent with constant comparative analysis.

Refinement of emergent categories and themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) and exploration of relationships and patterns across categories and themes (Seidman, 2006) gradually yielded an in-depth understanding of participants’ written and oral responses.

One limitation with the methodology relates to the number of parents who participated in the focus groups. Although 583 families were involved in the initial WTK program (Wideman & Campbell, 2006), and invitations went out to all schools, only ten caregivers, all mothers of Kindergarten children, chose to participate. Participation in the focus groups for educators and community partners was more extensive however, and the researchers concluded that sufficient data were collected to provide a holistic picture of why WTK was successful in North Bay.

Results

The results of the study are presented in this section under six inter-related themes that emerged from the data. Excerpts from the data supporting the results are not included extensively for reasons of space. However, they are in the final research report.

An Authentic Community Problem

Research participants repeatedly commented that prior to WTK “coming to town”, leaders in the North Bay community had already recognized improving early literacy as an authentic community problem – one that had widespread meaning and relevance and which people wished to address (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007). Based on the results of early identification measures, various educational groups, agencies, and community members had begun to mobilize. There was talk about multi-agency collaboration to “share the responsibility” of promoting literacy development. With the introduction of WTK, the promotion of early literacy became a “compelling cause” to which organizations could commit. Leaders in all the school boards, children’s agencies, and the public library, recognized this need and, motivated by concern for children and their families, were determined to do something concrete about it.

A Viable Source of Help

Research participants indicated that, when WTK “came to town”, program leaders and their organizations saw it as a significant potential source of help in addressing the authentic problem of improving early literacy. The willingness to collaborate and engage in collective action was based on a tacit judgement of WTK as a nationally-recognized program effective in enhancing young children’s transition to school. It was expected that WTK could provide “...children entering Kindergarten...with a foundation of enjoyable and successful (literacy-based) pre-school experiences that prepare them for school and learning” (The Learning Partnership, 2005, p.3).

A Creative Partnership

Research participants agreed that the WTK project in North Bay was more than just an adoption and implementation exercise; rather success was due to a creative process that melded WTK within a larger locally-developed early literacy development

strategy. For their part, the national leadership at TLP took a creative, partnership stance that included a significant role for local leadership in shaping the project. They encouraged the use of WTK within a context of local leadership, decision-making, and development. As the Director of Programs for TLP Canada stated in one of the interviews:

We encouraged the various community partners to come together to help make decisions about how this project would look in North Bay... We certainly have a framework of expectations as to what is important in terms of the WTK program.... But in terms of bringing this to a community and making it a community based model, the opportunity for those community partners to come together and make the key decisions... was certainly a key to success. We wanted our partners to feel valued and that we were not an organization coming in from Toronto saying, "This is what you should do". *Our whole premise was that we had a program that we can provide, but you're the people who know your community best and we need to hear from you. You need to give us direction as to what will happen...* (italics added).

Decisions that shaped the project to local needs included welcoming schools and community agencies as full partners, targeting all Kindergarten entrants in all four school boards, and reaching out to families of all pre-school children (not just those entering Kindergarten). Focus groups provided a number of examples of North Bay making WTK its own including the high quality of the locally-developed professional development sessions and the interactive nature of the locally-developed parent workshops. One highly unique and significant local extension of WTK was the establishment of the annual "Let the Learning Begin" (LTLB) community conference.

Dedicated Local Leadership

While research participants recognized the important contribution of the national TLP leaders who provided resources and acted in a responsive, supportive, and advisory role, they also indicated that the success of WTK lay in the dedication of local leaders to the project. Particularly, the focus groups reported on the strong, positive, role played by the two TLP local leaders in shaping the project and developing ownership and initiative for it within the community.

One of the local leaders had been a key figure in the formation of the earlier informal, multi-agency discussions about sharing responsibility for promoting literacy development. That person played a key role in taking the earlier alliance group, attracting more members, and forming a more structured committee with representatives from most community agencies and educational institutions concerned with early childhood literacy.

Participants in the research study specifically attributed the success of the initiative to the active participation of all identified key personnel at the local level (parents, community partners, and educators). Individuals in leadership positions in the various school boards and community agencies, were repeatedly

highlighted as the significant catalysts. In addition to the local TLP leaders, individuals mentioned most frequently were from three different participant groups: a program coordinator from one of the school boards; a representative from the Ontario Early Years Centre; and a representative from the children's department of the Public Library.

A Spirit of Collaboration, Generosity, and Support

Research participants noted a spirit of collaboration, generosity, and support among formal and informal leaders across the various local agencies. This kind of spirit was seen to enable collective action for a common purpose. As noted above, prior to WTK there was already a shared recognition among leaders and their organizations of the importance of improving levels of early literacy learning. There was also already a beginning alliance among school boards and some community organizations to this end. Thus, leaders within the various agencies were open to using their existing organizational structures to support WTK. However, respondents reported that prior to WTK, the organizational structures of the various school boards and community service agencies were not necessarily working together in a coherent way.

During the project, increased interaction among these organizational structures provided a powerful basis for generating and coordinating collective action. In turn, the networks and community partnerships emanating from WTK led to enhanced communication among the various agencies and strengthened working relationships. For example, leaders at various levels within the partnering organizations networked extensively, met frequently for planning meetings, and worked together when presenting events in the school and/or community.

That collaborative community partnership *processes* (Furman, 2004) were made "visible" to the community was considered highly significant because the agencies and school teams were seen together, presenting activities to families at the same WTK events. Research participants repeatedly identified as a central feature of the project and a reason for its success the emergence of a strong network of community agencies and groups, who visibly cared about children's early learning. One fundamental belief was, "It's our community, these children belong to all of us, and we are working together toward their well-being and success." The overall goal of closing the achievement gap (i.e., by working with children from families with diverse backgrounds and better preparing children to enter school with early literacy and related skills) was consistently described as a community-based endeavour.

A Network of Trusting Relationships

Research participants noted that collaboration among the various agencies was achieved through informal actions based on trusting relationships among individuals rather than on formal negotiations, contracts, and check-lists. This finding supports the conclusion of Couture, DeLong, & Wideman (1999) that it is the quality of the relationships that makes flexible, and effective collective action possible. In a relatively small city, many representatives of the various agencies already either knew, or knew of, one another through their multifaceted community involvement as citizens, parents, employees, and participants in

community activities. These informal networks were considered by research participants to be very strong in North Bay, and this was seen as contributing to the overall success of the WTK initiative. People within and among various agencies, including parents and care-givers were able to work together informally because some level of trust and cooperation pre-existed in the community, both organizationally and at the grass-roots “neighbourhood” level.

Representatives of all the partnering agencies reported that they had formerly been operating more or less independently of one another and there was little communication or cooperation toward common goals. Thus, the level of multi-agency collaboration generated by WTK was considered new for North Bay and the role played by key leaders who had strong personal networks and the ability to organize and bring people and groups together was considered central to its development. The two local TLP managers were consistently referenced for their strengths in this regard. Personnel from the school boards, as well as individuals from organizations such as the Ontario Early Years Centre and the North Bay Public Library, were also mentioned frequently. Community organizations appeared to translate their commitment to the project into collective action by working together toward common goals based on pre-existing and developing relationships among individuals and groups.

Research participants were impressed with the ways key players in the various school and community agencies formed partnerships that seemed to grow in trust as they collaborated in the common cause of promoting literacy development. As Bryk & Schneider (1996) also found, the researchers observed collaborative partnerships built on relational trust, creating an environment where individuals shared a moral commitment to act in the interests of the collective – and that a great deal of this trust was built upon voluntary commitments.

Research participants also frequently commented that WTK provided a vehicle for developing a collaborative approach to fostering, sustaining, and maintaining effective community partnerships. A fundamental implementation strategy and outcome for WTK in North Bay was the essential building of trust, commitment, and confidence not only among the agencies but also among parents, caregivers, and their families who attended the orientation sessions and community conference. This helped to ensure that parents and caregivers participated enthusiastically in opportunities to engage in the early learning of their children by utilizing new ideas, learning activities, and resources.

Conclusions

Based on the results above, it may be concluded that “the magic” in North Bay resulted from the alignment of six, mutually supportive circumstances or “keys to success,” all of which seemed to play a necessary part in pulling together the network of TLP and community resources to generate effective collective action by the partners: 1) identifying early literacy learning as an authentic community priority; 2) recognizing WTK as a source of help to address this priority; 3) treating the endeavour as a creative partnership between TLP and local leaders; 4) providing significant scope for local leadership; 5) nurturing a spirit of collaboration among the school boards and other community

agencies; 6) building upon trusting relationships that facilitated flexible and informal inter-organizational action.

While the existence of committed and able local leadership is identified as one of the six keys, the quality of leadership emanating both from TLP and the local agencies played an essential role in the development of all six keys—creating vision, developing widespread understanding and agreement, mobilizing resources, and building relationships. Thus multi-agency leadership was shared among allies devoted to a common cause, to meet the needs of both TLP and the community of North Bay. Partnership, trust, collective purpose, and community efficacy resulted in co-ordinated and widespread collective action to promote early learning as a *shared* endeavour.

The North Bay experience with WTK was not a case of local leaders “adopting and implementing” an externally developed innovation. Rather the experience was one of knowledge creation (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007) in which TLP and local leaders worked together to develop, act upon, and assess a locally developed response to an authentic problem. Responsiveness (Begley, 2001) was a significant feature of this leadership. In terms of this study, responsiveness in leadership means being sensitive to the needs and strengths of all of the partners and being able to work flexibly with co-leaders to incorporate those needs and strengths into the project.

The “keys to success” resulted in enthusiastic participation in the WTK program and very high levels of collaboration among the schools, all area school boards, and other community agencies. In retrospect, the researchers noted that the North Bay version of WTK produced what Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon (2009) have identified as an organizational phenomenon shared by successful schools. The phenomenon comprises three elements: the development of an agreed-upon purpose; a collective belief that the purpose can be attained, and collective action toward the purpose. This study suggests that the organizational phenomenon Glickman et. al. identified may apply also to successful multi-agency, educational change initiatives. Thus, attending to the six “keys to success” may assist authentic leaders to create or enhance agreed-upon purpose, collective action, and belief in attainment in multi-agency, community projects.

Implications

The North Bay experience with WTK has implications for leaders who are developing multi-agency, integrated services for the early learning of young of children. (Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan, 2002; Corter, 2005; Cheminais, 2009). Because they involve autonomous organizations, such projects cannot be based effectively on a technical rationality epistemology (Schon, 1982) involving hierarchical structures and adoption and implementation, replication models (Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan, 2002). Instead this study suggests that multi-agency projects demand the use of synergistic, genuinely collaborative approaches to the “joint planning and delivery of co-ordinated services” (Cheminais, 2009), an approach more in tune with partnership, alliance, and an ethic of community (Furman, 2004) than with rank and hierarchy.

The WTK, North Bay experience may contribute to ongoing efforts to address top-down/bottom-up tensions in educational

change. As Hunt (1987) pointed out, top-down change initiatives by provincial or national agencies may address centrally-defined needs but tend to fail because they do not address local realities. Bottom-up change initiatives, on the other hand, address local needs and circumstances but tend to fail because they are not adequately supported, sustained, and institutionalized. Much has been done in recent years to try to address this dichotomy based on improved knowledge of the phenomenology of educational change (Fullan, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Notwithstanding this fact, however, the top-down perspective continues to be pervasive, embedded in the hierarchical structure of the “education system” and the professional language of education itself. In regard to the latter, words like “implementation”, and their technical-rationality-embedded connotations, still pervade education vocabulary (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009) to the extent that authors like Datnow, Hubbard, and Mehan (2002) feel the need to disassociate themselves from their traditional meanings. Moreover, there continues to be a tendency for collegial terms, such as “collaboration” to be co-opted (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990) for top-down purposes.

The findings of this study suggest that the dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up change may be addressed when central authorities support local initiatives to develop creative solutions to shared problems. For such a process to work, central leaders need to take a partnership stance and, within broadly stated expectations, honour local leadership, collaboration, and decision-making. What this study demonstrates is that, rather than a process of replication, successful “implementation” is at its heart a creative, learning process (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007) in which what is to be “implemented” must be jointly developed and contextualized to local requirements.

This study supports assertions by Johnston and Kirschner (1996) that general factors may be identified that influence success in partnerships and that the study of individual partnerships is a means to identifying such factors. The study also supports the judgement expressed by Johnson and Kirshner (1996) and Corter (2008) that each partnership is unique, and no magic formula for success exists. Thus, one-size-fits-all approaches to educational change are inadequate (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009) and there is a need for highly-effective authentic, and responsive leaders who can bring partners together to create solutions in context.

The results of this study also point to the need for more comprehensive understanding of relationship-building in multi-agency collaboration. According to Cheminais (2009) ‘working partnerships’ involve

... processes that build relationships between different groups of professionals and services at different levels, to get things done. It entails two or more organizations or groups of practitioners joining together to achieve something they could not do alone, sharing a common problem or issue and collectively taking responsibility for resolving it. Partnership therefore refers to a way of working as well as to a form of organization (p. 5).

Delong, Couture, and Wideman (1999) wrote about the importance of relationship in leading an interagency partnership as follows, “For us, a key factor is the trust relationship among the project leaders that enables them to identify and resolve issues that are critical to the success of the partnership. Our experience confirms the view that issues of power and voice are far more likely to be resolved positively within the context of strong collaborative relationships.”

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SUBMISSION INFORMATION: All articles will be reviewed by the editor to determine their suitability for this publication. In addition, at least two additional reviewers will conduct blind reviews of the article.

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Stanley, R. J. & Hollander, M. P. (1992). Beyond the boundaries: The quest for knowledge. *Administrative Life*, 2(3), 36-49.

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