

Summary of Research Findings

A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of Administrators Engaged in Coaching to Support the Assessment Dimension of their Instructional Leadership

This summary document provides an overview of the research findings for a recent study conducted by researchers from the University of Alberta for the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) as a result of a grant from Alberta Education. The complete final report can be accessed through the following link.

<http://www.aac.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Narrative-Inquiry-Coaching-to-Support-Instructional-Leadership-in-Assessment.pdf>

OVERVIEW

The Alberta Assessment Consortium, in collaboration with Alberta Education, undertook a professional learning project with three school jurisdictions in southern Alberta. The AAC project was designed to support the implementation of *Professional Practice Competency #4—Providing Instructional Leadership with a specific focus on assessment*, and employed a detailed model for coaching in formative assessment practice. The AAC project was based on the premise that in the same way that formative assessment supports student learning, the application of those same principles of formative assessment can support professional learning for teachers and leaders. A significant feature was a requirement that all participants self-select in order to be considered; thus the focus for the project was on professional learning and growth rather than on teacher or leader evaluation.

The first phase of the implementation project occurred during the winter/spring of 2013. Three regional meetings were held with the full cohort of participants to lay the foundation for the two key strands of the project: 1) enhancing leadership capacity in regard to the content of sound classroom assessment practice, and 2) introducing a coaching model leaders would use during conversations and observations with teachers that would exemplify the principles of formative assessment. Thus, formative assessment became both the *content* and the *process* of the project.

Phase two began in the fall of 2013 and continued through the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. A full-time AAC facilitator worked alongside school leaders to support them in working through the coaching process. While regional meetings were still held once each year with the entire cohort, the project focus shifted to on-site work at each school. The AAC facilitator worked with each school leader at least three times during each of the two years of the second phase of the project.

A visual representation of the coaching model was developed to assist participants in working through the key elements of the process. http://www.aac.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Instructional_Leadership_Coaching_Process_With_External_Coach.pdf

At first glance, the process may appear somewhat arbitrary and tedious; however, with the involvement of the AAC facilitator (coach), participants soon become at ease with the process and began to understand the importance of each step.

Researchers (Clandinin, Fenichel, Menon, Paszek, Saleh, & Swanson) from the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta were engaged to undertake a research study of the overall AAC project. A literature review was completed prior to undertaking the empirical research. Central to the research study was an in-depth narrative inquiry into seven administrators’

experiences of professional learning through their engagement with the AAC coaching project. Two smaller research studies, which included semi-structured interviews, took place with three school jurisdiction leaders and six teachers who were involved with the project. Although the AAC coaching project was completed in June 2015, the research component was extended for 6 months in order to collect further data on the sustainability of professional learning that occurred with the project. Completion of the research component and reporting occurred in December 2015.

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

From the literature review, the following points seemed particularly salient. For principals to be effective leaders in assessment reform in schools it is necessary that they engage in their own professional learning and experience support in that process of learning. Principals must become assessment literate if they are to be a support to the teachers in their schools (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Because growth into instructional leadership is an ongoing process there are complex factors that shape and define this growth, such as: early school learning experiences, alternative experiences with leadership in sports, encounters with significant formal and/or informal mentors, and personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

Despite the few studies that describe the experiences of principals in the process of learning to be assessment literate, there are some promising practices described in the literature. One such approach is the use of coaching by an external coach who works alongside the principal as a guide in the professional learning.

A key feature of coaching is the importance of development, and maintenance, of trust as a central feature of the connection between the coaches and the principals. And in the studies reviewed, where this trust exists the coaching experience is generally regarded as positive.

School leaders learn how to be assessment leaders not by becoming experts but by discovering how to be supportive of teachers in processes of change. Teachers tend to trust leaders whom they feel and observe to have the necessary pedagogical background and who are seen as supportive rather than merely evaluative. Principals learn how to be leaders through collaborative relationships with teachers and other leaders, through encounters with research literature, and through effective coaching experiences.

The complete literature review can be found in the complete research study at <http://www.aac.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Narrative-Inquiry-Coaching-to-Support-Instructional-Leadership-in-Assessment.pdf>.

METHODS

Using the methodology of narrative inquiry, the researchers inquired into the experiences of seven administrators: two each from two school jurisdictions and three from a third school jurisdiction. During August 2014–November 2015, members of the research team engaged in six research conversations with each participant ranging from 1½ to 2½ hours in length. Conversations were held in places where participants felt most comfortable. Sites such as homes, restaurants, coffee shops, or work places were chosen. Prior to each conversation, research team members met to ensure continuity across research conversations.

In the research conversations, the researchers inquired into their early experiences, their schooling and teacher education experiences, their teaching experiences, their experiences as administrators, and their

experiences of the AAC coaching process. After the fourth conversation, each researcher began a process of identifying narrative threads from participants’ experiences over time. Each conversation was recorded and transcribed. The table below summarizes the purpose of each conversation.

Conversation	Purpose
First	Research design was discussed and participant consent obtained.
Second	Participants shared an artifact that sustained them in their practice.
Third	Participants shared experiences around assessment.
Fourth	Participants shared an artifact related to an experience with assessment and coaching.
Fifth	Draft narrative accounts were shared with participants for their input.
Sixth	Draft version of the Resonant Thread section was shared with participants.

Participant stories are shared below using the identified narrative threads as an organizing structure. Many additional participant stories are included in the full research report.

RESONANT THREADS ACROSS NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS

In the following narrative accounts, the pseudonyms of Chance, Jack, John, Spencer, Helen, Johnny, and Jordan were selected with participants. A small number of stories have been selected for inclusion in this summary.

Thread 1: Experiences of early landscapes as shaping administrators’ professional learning.

In the literature review of research on principals’ experiences of professional learning, the researchers identified early life stories as a theme in shaping principals’ school leadership practices. In conversations with participants, researchers heard many stories of their experiences in their early landscapes in home and community places. It was clear these experiences had shaped who they were becoming, that is, their stories to live by, as well as their professional learning. For example, Chance spoke often of how he was shaped by having grown up in rural and small town places. The experience of growing up on a farm, and with both of his parents as educators, has had lasting influence on his stories to live by.

Helen shared how her experiences as the second-generation daughter of immigrant parents shaped her parents’ and her views of the importance of schooling. Being the child of immigrants was also visible in John’s stories as he spoke of growing up with a strong work ethic. He was greatly influenced by watching his parents work at “hard jobs” with a clear determination to build a new, and sustaining, life in Canada.

In the narratives they shared, they easily slid back to home and community places showing how significant these forces were in their lives. The richness and diversity of their early experiences shaped their individual knowledge, their relationship to what knowledge matters most to them, and their relationship to subsequent experiences of professional learning.

Thread 2: Experiences of Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) schooling as shaping administrators’ professional learning.

As researchers engaged with participants’ experiences of their early landscapes, another resonant thread was made visible relative to their personal experiences of Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) schooling. Participant stories of being in school revealed how these earlier school experiences informed them as they became educators engaged in leadership and assessment practices.

Helen shared an experience she had with her high school Social Studies teacher who created a comfortable and caring classroom environment. She said, “All of us kids felt very comfortable in his class... he was the kind of teacher that I wanted to be.” For Helen, this foundational experience has meant that developing strong and caring relationships with youth and colleagues is at the heart of her professional learning.

John, an immigrant child learning and speaking three languages, told school stories of his struggle with English. Despite being dominated by thoughts of “failing [school] every year,” he spoke fondly about his Grade 8 teacher who “was one of those consummate positive people who never gave up on anybody... John, you can do whatever you want. You can do anything you want. Don’t let anybody tell you that you can’t.” By valuing supportive relationships and having a strong work ethic, he showed how his early school stories shaped his current stories to live by.

As they told their stories of experience, participants showed how their current professional practice, and learning—who they are and are becoming—has been shaped by the varied relational, caring, label-resistant, passionate and occasionally tension-filled influences of their early school experiences.

Thread 3: Experiences of relationships as shaping administrators’ professional learning.

In addition to the many early relationships in home and school landscapes highlighted in Threads 1 and 2, the researchers also discerned learning through diverse relationships as a resonant thread. Participants’ experiences of learning in relation with colleagues, children, and youth shaped their educational careers and contributed to their professional learning. Each participant shared stories that made clear the importance of building and sustaining collegial relationships throughout their professional lives. It also became evident that they learned from, and valued deeply, their relationships with children and/or youth.

Johnny, for instance, recalled his time working as a new administrator within a northern community and shared how when he purchased a house, a tangible sign of his commitment to the community, it afforded him a new level of acceptance with the teachers and families he worked alongside.

John’s love for his own three children showed how being a father helped him in his professional learning. The researchers saw that his children served as evocative touchstones, markers which seemed to echo and inspire John’s strong wish to meet the needs of all students.

Each administrator showed how relationships with children, youth, colleagues, and community members *all* matter to processes of learning in schools. Through their stories, participants revealed that doing the work to build and maintain relationships is a multifaceted and crucial aspect of their professional learning.

Thread 4: Experiences of creating collaborative spaces as shaping administrators’ professional learning.

The collaborative spaces described in participant’s stories took many forms and informed their professional learning in varied ways. In the participants’ experiences, collaborative spaces exist in processes of dialogue as well as in physical environments such as school clubs, or within the AAC coaching project.

Helen helped researchers attend to collaborative spaces when she spoke about “working in a different way.” She highlighted her background in counselling as a way to navigate her administrative work on discipline-related issues in more relational ways and specifically invoked various school clubs where safety and collaboration were encouraged. Jack, an avid world traveller, invited yet another view of collaborative spaces when he shared how the experience of being an outsider in a country “where you don’t speak the

language” helped him develop a more empathic, supportive, non-judgmental perspective when he encountered students who arrived in Canada not able to “speak the language.”

Various obstacles to the creation of collaborative spaces were also exemplified in participant experiences. For example, Chance highlighted how easy it was, as an administrator, to be even temporarily pulled away from reciprocal, collaborative practice by the perceived pressures to be an “expert.”

Participants’ experiences drew attention to how the nurturance, effective use, and importance of collaborative spaces were tied to the building of humility, empathy, trust, and reciprocity.

Thread 5: Experiences of being assessed as a teacher as shaping administrators' professional learning.

Linked to the ideas of trust and safety offered in previous threads, researchers discerned another resonant thread when participants shared stories of being assessed as teachers. There was a definite sense that these experiences have shaped, and continue to shape, their professional practice and learning around leadership and assessment.

Jordan, Helen, and Johnny experienced a sometimes-uneasy spectrum of feedback during their early teaching careers. Though Jordan did have the benefit of receiving detailed, specific feedback about his practice, he also received feedback that wasn’t substantive and where the only comment was, “You’re a good teacher.” Johnny discussed how as a beginning teacher he did not get the kind of constructive, useful feedback he desired; the kind he felt could really help him grow in his professional learning. In her third year of teaching, Helen was grateful when she finally did get more detailed feedback based on informal observations rather than the checklists that had accompanied previous formal assessments.

Through their stories, the participants showed that their professional learning as administrators was very much affected by the ways they were themselves assessed as teachers. Through the importance they placed on being sincere, sensitive, and offering clear detail, all with a desire not to “deflate” teachers, they showed the importance of forward-looking approaches to teacher assessment.

Thread 6: Experiences of the distinctions between learning and achieving as shaping administrators’ professional learning.

Recognizing that the ways of being assessed as teachers informed participants’ professional learning, the researchers began to see how several participants expressed tension in their early and ongoing negotiations of summative evaluation and assessment for the purpose of student learning. Helen, for example, remembered a teacher who refused to award full marks to students because she did not want them feeling that they didn’t need to work as hard anymore.

John spoke about repeatedly feeling judged or assessed when he was younger. “So in terms of being judged or assessed, I hated exams. I hated tests. I hated anything that came back.” He preferred the assessments he received from his karate instructor which were written observations with the goal of improving his technique. When John started teaching, he employed a weighted distribution and a traditional evaluation process because that was what was expected. Over the years, though, his views on assessment have shifted to focus more on formative assessment.

As a learner with a disability, still undiagnosed in grade school, Jordan remembered struggling with test anxiety, especially when it came to reading and understanding test questions. Earlier in his teaching career, he constructed tests that were more conventionally rigorous and made them conform to the philosophy

of the bell curve. He didn't think too much about whether the test questions themselves were well crafted, whether he had taught the material as effectively as he might have, or whether a child might be having a bad day. Now, from an educator's perspective, Jordan supports project-based learning and believes in "redo the test" because he feels that traditional testing has a finality that doesn't make sense in real life. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that testing was less important than making sure that all the students in his classroom were learning the material.

Through inquiring into their stories of assessment and evaluative practice, the researchers became aware of participants' attention to the importance of considerations of how students' experiences can affect both how they learn and how they do on tests.

Thread 7: Experiences of coaching and being coached as shaping administrators' professional learning.

The researchers also noted a resonant thread woven from participants' stories of being coached in the AAC assessment for learning project, and elsewhere, as well as their experiences of being coaches.

In his stories of coaching, John described how he continues to hone his coaching skills as part of his instructional leadership. He observed that, as in coaching volleyball, skill development is an ongoing process and suggested that the same is true when teachers or principals are developing new skills. It was noteworthy to him that the AAC coaching project allowed him to be less directive with teachers because he knows that teachers need to develop their own practical knowledge. Jack found that the AAC coach steered the conversation about classroom observation away from evaluative language to a dialogue about assessment practice and felt that the process helped him grow in relation to assessment practices.

For his part, Chance noted that the AAC coach helped him develop confidence in coaching as he worked toward collaboration rather than evaluation, conversation rather than prescription. Similarly, John shared that his experiences with the AAC coach set a tone to the project of collaborative conversations rather than evaluation. Helen also valued the nature of the classroom visits during the AAC project for their non-evaluative approach and for how they allowed her to get "feedback from teachers as well."

Spencer singled out ways the AAC coach's incorporation of the specific text by Dylan William into the process allowed everyone to work from a shared place in their professional learning through the use of a "common language." Jordan expressed his feeling that the AAC coaching experience works well because teachers observe that administrators are also being coached.

As participants shared stories of their experiences of being coached and of being coaches, they highlighted the collaborative, practical, and knowledgeable practices of the AAC coach.

Thread 8: Experiences of struggling or being challenged as shaping administrators' professional learning.

Related to some stories of their early landscapes and assessment experiences, and to their conceptions of collaborative spaces, the researchers noted connections between participants' experiences of working through their own life challenges and how they were then able to attend more closely to the experiences of students and their families.

For example, John grew up as a son of immigrant parents who strived to provide him with a good home in challenging circumstances. He spoke of the family's lack of wealth and material goods, of frequent moves, and of learning new languages as their moves took them across the country. He told stories of being "not a good student academically" and of needing to "chip away" at learning and how he moved readily between very different groups of students in his own schooling. As a result, he can understand the

many struggles that children and youth experience which shape their lives in schools. In his words: “Sometimes our teachers forget that these kids are individuals.” In his professional practice, his experiences help him attend more carefully to others, to who they are and are becoming, and to who he, and teachers, might be in their lives.

Jordan struggled with unidentified dyslexia for his K-12 years and subsequently spent much of his schooling in the somewhat marginalized spaces of special education classes. These lived experiences unintentionally taught him to see himself as not a good learner. Through connection to his experiences of working with horses on his family ranch, he came to make sense of school through alternative stories of perseverance and resilience. His father modelled for him the necessity to not give up, to commit to learning, and as a beginning teacher he was drawn to work with students who found themselves at their own edges in a youth correctional facility. He continues to make his dyslexia visible and encourages others to find, share, and build on their strengths.

Acquiring the flexibility to shift from feeling like an outsider to a condition of feeling more or less at home was something participants were able to engage in because of their life experiences.

Thread 9: Experiences of learning through practice, and by making mistakes, as shaping administrators' professional learning.

Learning through practice and through mistakes has been part of participants' professional learning. In several threads above, the researchers highlighted ways that familial and school experiences have shaped participants' stories of themselves and their professional practice.

For Jack, learning through practice has often involved feeling challenged. After teaching mainly chemistry for a number of years, Jack actively sought to challenge himself by asking his principal to allow him to teach physics. Later, following his principal's advice to begin Master's studies in order to be considered for administrative positions in his school, Jack shared with us the further challenges of being a first year administrator and graduate student.

John noted that, through his experience as an administrator, he has learned how to negotiate one aspect of his practice that he originally found very challenging. In situations where he may need to refuse a request, particularly from a teacher, his practical experience has made him more confident in saying “no with a why.” He has learned that if he offers an explanation as to why certain requests must be denied it encourages an appreciation of the complexities underlying his decisions.

Many participants spoke about experiences as students, teachers, and administrators that highlighted the kind of practices in which they shouldn't engage. Based upon her experiences as a student with assessment practices she felt were unfair, as a teacher Helen sought to assess in ways that meshed more clearly with her sense of fairness.

Many participants shared how they were able to learn from mistakes and how their own creative, curious, and relational practices taught them to live alongside children, youth, teachers, and families.

SUSTAINABILITY

The AAC Coaching in Assessment for Learning Project was completed in June of 2015. In October and November of 2015 the researchers engaged in the sixth and final research conversation. They worked with each participant to finalize the narrative accounts that had been written in relation with them,

reviewed with them the draft Resonant Thread Section—particularly those sections relevant to them individually—and then asked them to engage in conversations about sustainability.

In order to understand the professional learning experiences of the administrators, the researchers inquired into how the end of the 3-year AAC project affected their learning and assessment practices, as well as their instructional leadership within their respective school environments. At the time of this sixth conversation, they had each begun a new school year. In the absence of the support from the AAC project, the researchers wondered if the professional learning of the AAC Project could be sustained, and created a list of guiding questions, assuring participants that anonymity would be guaranteed.

Participant responses were grouped with respect to three categories

District considerations

What happens to this initiative when jurisdiction priorities change?

What happens when central leadership changes?

School considerations

What happens when teachers move, new teachers to school, beginning teachers?

What happens when school administration changes? You move schools?

Sustainability of AAC model

What happens to this initiative when resources change?

Has this initiative become embedded?

District considerations. Participants offered diverse opinions as to how this initiative was taken up by their jurisdictions. Some spoke of the project in terms of alignment to the competencies expected of administrators. Others noted tensions could occur in striving to meet jurisdiction requirements while doing what they understood was right for their schools. It was highlighted that the tractability of the project permitted schools to interpret jurisdiction goals in ways which were responsive to individual school contexts. Recognizing jurisdiction goals and emphases can change, it was suggested that good practice and good teaching involves an understanding that this type of initiative supports student learning and simultaneously empowers teachers. It was also felt that initiatives of this caliber could facilitate other projects. A belief in ongoing collaborative conversations about assessment was also proffered as a way to nurture change.

Each administrator spoke of central office jurisdiction leadership as pivotal to the lifespan of an initiative. Some suggested, in the absence of strong central leadership buy-in, certain initiatives might not be sustained. Another administrator indicated that school boards and family communities could influence what form central leadership takes thus affecting how projects are taken up, and additionally, the allocation of resources. It was proposed that one possible way to sustain certain initiatives, such as the AAC Coaching Model, might be to have jurisdictions incorporate specific questions about assessment practices in their interviews for incoming school administrators.

School considerations. The continuity of practices and professional learning in schools is often affected by the turnover within teaching staff and school administrators. Though each school has its own policies and practices for introducing new - beginning or more experienced - teachers to its school context, it was suggested that the continuation of practices introduced by the AAC model is dependent on their well-rooted establishment, and acceptance, among a majority of staff and administration. In this way, teachers

joining an AAC participating school community, but who had limited or no training in formative assessment, might feel the collaborative AAC methods as an intense induction and/or - depending on their own experiences and inclinations - as something tied to its own form of supervision. It was considered that potential tensions might be mitigated through either peer or administrative mentors chosen from staff most comfortable with the AAC model.

Two key facets of the AAC process are collaborative, classroom observation and personal reflective practice. With regard to classroom observations, it was suggested that beginning teachers might be more comfortable having administrators and/or fellow teachers in their rooms. It was also considered possible that more experienced teachers - perhaps not as initially comfortable with administrator or peer observation - might already be more reflective in their personal practice. In all cases, it was fairly clear that turnover in teaching staff always presents challenges and changes to school practices, and the sustainability of certain initiatives.

Equally evident was the feeling that principals shape the directions of a school. Upon reflection, there was a strong sense that the AAC initiative, while not the only initiative at play or of value in each school, was significant to administrators and had become important to many teachers. As discussed in the previous section, jurisdiction priorities can have a real effect (sometimes supportive, sometimes limiting) on principals' pursuit of certain directions. But, a principal can still find ways to embody practices she/he values in his/her school. Additionally, in ways that make the question of sustainability somewhat more varied and dynamic, participants observed that outgoing principals could choose to take practices, such as the AAC Coaching in Formative Assessment model, with them to new schools. Conversely, an existing teaching staff might take it upon themselves to introduce an incoming principal to what they feel works for them. The latter approach to sustainability is dependent on the passions and interests of an incoming principal. Related to this, it was also expressed that an incoming principal has a responsibility not to copy what already exists, but to make it his or her own.

Sustainability of AAC model. Observations were made that the regular availability of the coach had been significant. Without AAC funding and the AAC coach, the sustainability of the initiative has necessitated that budgets - of money, time, and human resources - be thoughtfully and carefully allocated to ensure that teachers have the needed support to continue in the AAC practices that have become important to participating school communities. It was suggested that in order to negotiate the tensions that accompany changes in resources, it is important to work creatively within administrative (jurisdiction, school, community) structures and to create an environment invested in assessment for learning.

Overall, the AAC project was seen to have intrinsic value, especially in combination with other jurisdiction initiatives. The perceived positive qualities of the AAC initiative have allowed it to build various school-specific forms of momentum. School administrators are asking themselves how to keep this momentum going. It was acknowledged that the quality of instructional leadership provided within a school impacts the degree to which understandings gained from the AAC project can be maintained. In keeping with this, perhaps one of the more dynamic signs of the project's potential sustainability exists where even teachers who were at first uncomfortable with the model, now actively seek out classroom visits from their administrators and peers. Thus, adopting a mindset of trial and error was described as being instrumental to any process of sustainability.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The focus in the narrative inquiry, and in the overall AAC coaching project, positioned administrators as learners rather than implementers or managers. Chance noted that being approached as, and encouraged to position himself as a learner in the field of school administration, is “a shift, in our division, that’s a shift. I’m not sure administrators were always placed in that position.” Chance further noted that, “just being able to go to a professional meeting or staff meeting and saying, ‘here’s what I learned through this’.... is a huge amount of legitimacy” and drew our attention to the importance of administrators seeing themselves as professional learners.

As the researchers engaged with participants more specifically around their work as part of the AAC coaching project, participants saw that while their past, shaping experiences were richly varied and different from one another’s, they all drew from early familial, community, and cultural landscapes as they engaged in the opportunities offered through the project. And, just as their life experiences prior to the AAC coaching project were varied, their experiences within the project were also multifaceted and diverse. Each participant engaged in professional learning in ways that had benefit to them in their practice as school leaders and which they also felt had—in ways specific to each school context—helped to nurture safe, collaborative spaces with, and between, their staff and colleagues.

A balance, it seems, must always be struck between school administrators’ ongoing expression as learners within school communities and their responsibilities as leaders, who carry their own experiences and knowing, to find ways to do what they feel best supports the teachers, students, and communities with whom they work most closely. The differences in the ways each administrator discussed the continuation of the learning and practices associated with the AAC project in their schools, became yet another example of how important it was that the AAC coaching model encouraged those involved to make it their own rather than follow a perhaps more traditional, prescribed course of professional learning. Further, the AAC model created spaces for professional learning that was individual. It was possible for the researchers to begin to consider how the type of professional learning offered through the AAC coaching project might have multifaceted community-building qualities. This is because the kind of learning spaces the model created were not designed to only honour one way of learning, or to function in ways that required administrators to “tick learning boxes.”

This research study contributes to a growing body of literature around professional development, professional learning, assessment practices, coaching models, and instructional leadership. The results of this study differs from the existing literature on professional learning and school reform as it highlights the professional learning of school administrators in ways that situates them not only as leaders or perceived “experts,” but as ongoing learners in their school communities, and because it foregrounds the notably relational, personal, and situational nature of professional learning, particularly in the context of assessment for learning.

INTERVIEW STUDY WITH PARTICIPATING TEACHERS

The research team created a set of interview questions to determine the experiences of participating teachers with the coaching project. The six teachers who accepted an invitation to participate embodied a diversity of personal and professional experiences, including: a range of years of teaching experience, grade levels taught, varied school contexts, and number of years of AAC project participation.

Teacher participants indicated they engaged in the coaching project because they had been invited by their administrators and voluntarily accepted. Teachers noted various reasons for being involved in the

project. One teacher saw the relevance of the project to leadership development. A common thread among many of the teachers centered on professional development and improving assessment practices. One teacher indicated that when an administrator invited her to participate, the administrator, “kind of approached me in that this is more her professional growth and I would just assist her and help her in her professional growth and so I said, ‘yeah absolutely because I’m sure I can learn a lot too.’”

One beginning teacher who was introduced to the start of the project in his practicum alongside his mentor teacher said, “I knew this project was going on and initially, when I was hired, I said ‘hey, anything that has to do with assessment or the AAC, I’d love to be a part of it.’”

Comparing the AAC model of assessment to previous forms of assessment.

When teacher participants were asked how this form of engaging in assessment compared with previous forms of assessment they had engaged in, there were a variety of responses. One teacher said, “It’s more intense but because of the intensity it was more valuable.” Another teacher reflected, “Even if I just compare [this work] to my previous elementary school, they hadn’t done a lot with assessment at that school” whereas the AAC coaching “was mostly focusing on what was your outcome and how do you know that you taught that, how do you know that the students learned it.” Thinking about the coaching project, the teacher felt that her AAC experiences took her out of her “comfort zone,” but that it was helpful to collaboratively reflect upon the ways her teaching practices could shape student learning.

In their observations of the AAC coaching model, participants shared that respect and trust were integral in the collaborative learning process. One teacher observed, “With the whole coaching model, they don’t really tell you what to do or what you need to work on but they engage you in conversations to come up with your own solutions.” Drawing upon experiences with assessment related to other jurisdiction initiatives, a teacher spoke to the quality of the feedback from coaches compared to previous forms of assessments:

Yeah it’s very different, absolutely, very different... So I remember when I was being evaluated when I first started teaching, it was just a lot of you’re doing great... really didn’t provide me any detailed feedback in terms of here’s what you need to work on or here’s what you need to strive towards.

Other participants related this appreciation of detailed feedback, and the time this necessitates, to their own assessment practices alongside students. One teacher stated, “We try to push quantity throughout the year... we forget about the quality and taking the time to truly assess each of the individual kids.”

Sharing stories of experiences related to AAC participation.

Participants shared particular stories of their experiences of engaging in the AAC project. For example, one teacher noted, “after I got over that first initial bout of nerves and got into it, then it was no problem... part of the nerves is that old evaluation sense [where] six people are coming in to watch me and judge me.” For her, the AAC process was “like a lifeline... it gave us ways of taking the evaluation and judgement out of it.”

Similar to other participants, one teacher emphasized that much depended on having a good relationship with school administrators. For this teacher, “Being able to act as a coach with a colleague who’s a little bit further ahead in the practice, me engaging as a coach there and asking the questions about the process” was valuable. Referencing a story of working alongside a colleague, this teacher believed that the coaching experience helped to create a more trusting, collaborative environment where constructive feedback is less likely to be perceived in a defensive manner.

Other participants told of learning to differentiate between which assignments needed to be marked, which ones did not, and having the space to ruminate over these kinds of considerations. For instance, one teacher felt formative assessments allowed students and teachers to “see the growth in the student” and the summative is “where the student is.”

Teachers additionally reflected upon student involvement within the coaching process. One participant shared how school administrators sat down with students and had relational conversations. Pointing to a deepening teacher/student relationship, a teacher reflected upon a moment whereby a shy boy participated in a classroom game to support his teacher in the presence of those who had come to the class to observe the lesson.

Shifting practice(s) following AAC participation.

Several teacher participants expressed the belief that their teaching and assessment practices have shifted following their engagement in the AAC coaching project. One teacher believed that his AAC participation “solidified what [he] felt” in relation to assessment because his practice has always been deeply rooted in collaboration. For the remaining five participants who felt that AAC participation shifted their practice, there were differences in the ways these shifts were described.

Two teachers compared their assessment practices at the beginning of their teaching careers to their current assessment practices. One participant remarked, “When I go back and look through what I did that first year compared to now, night and day difference. My assessment practice is completely different, terminology I use with the kids is different, activities are different, the assessment part, it’s all different. And I think it’s a lot better.”

A few teachers spoke of being “more conscious” and “more aware” of their assessment practices following AAC coaching. One teacher stated that AAC involvement has “changed the way that I think of different learning activities... it’s just made me more conscious of the way that I find out how the kids know.” Another teacher reflected that she is now “more aware” of the feedback she is giving students. She explained she now plans her lessons using “more strategies and more of the key concepts... which I did use before but I try and use them more purposefully now.”

Reminiscent of responses from other interview questions, some participants described how detailed comments, feedback, and conversations fostered new understandings within their teaching and assessment practices. Teachers noted that conversations related to formative assessment served to delineate areas to “focus on” and, additionally, helped to transfer learning or apply “it to other contexts.” Some participants described how participation in the AAC project provided movement away from surface-level evaluations of teaching to opportunities to view teacher/classroom observations as sites for growth.

Shifting relationships following AAC participation.

Participants were asked if they believed their relationships with administrators, colleagues, and students had shifted following AAC participation. For many teachers, trust, in the form of collaborative relations with students, colleagues, and administration, was ascribed significant value. In response to a query about whether the assessment for learning approach affected her relationship with students, one participant revealed, “I feel like I’m building better relationships with that group of kids from what I used to do.”

Thinking about her experiences alongside her colleagues, a participant expressed how important it was to feel comfortable in exchanging ideas on formative assessment: “I think this could be really difficult if you just don’t have that relationship.”

The AAC project enabled some teachers to feel a sense of inclusiveness that was missing in previous professional and personal experiences of assessment. Contrasting this project with other experiences of professional learning around assessment, one participant affirmed, “So it was a really good deep in-depth look at different assessment practices in ways that I’d never been able to look at them before.” Another spoke to the difference in how they were assessed as teachers by previous school administrators where it “was very surface level” to now where “it’s a lot more focused, and it’s a lot more relaxing almost to work in that environment, because I know that they’re not walking in and judging everything I do.” One teacher noted that for his school context, “The plan is to move towards more observational collaborative work because our admin and most of the staff now believe that by taking the best of everyone, we can hopefully come up with something that’s greater.” What became visible for the researchers was that for these particular teachers, the AAC coaching model built around conversations, practices, role reversals, and other activities, fostered a synergistic spirit within their school communities.

Many teacher participants highlighted the centrality of time and support structures as considerations. In her discussion about deepening conversations related to assessment practices alongside her school administrator, a participant reflected, “I think the one thing that really stands out for me with the project is that it allowed me an opportunity to be with my administrator for good chunks of time, focused chunks of time.” Several teachers discussed negotiating time constraints alongside expectations as part of their AAC experience. Speaking to the feasibility of the AAC model of assessment becoming embedded in his school context, one teacher qualified, “Unless team teaching becomes more of a focus here and the budget restrictions that we have in release time and sub time, it’s hard to engage [in the process].” Relating her AAC experience to other reform initiatives, another teacher emphasized that the shift towards assessment for learning is an ongoing process that requires time and structural support: “I’ve been around long enough to have seen initiatives sometimes very worthwhile and it’s come and go because you don’t put the support behind it and you don’t take the time either.”

Some participants expressed the belief that shifts in assessment practices must accompany shifts in larger reporting practices and structures. One teacher voiced his frustration that the outcomes-based reporting practices he learned during his pre-service education program did not align with school expectations for reporting in his first year of practice. He wondered how teachers and administrators might negotiate this tension, especially when provincial test scores and final report card grades are used as criteria for post-secondary admissions. Another teacher spoke about her efforts in trying to balance formative assessment practices, which often do not entail numeric grades, with final reporting practices: “Now when we’re in this formative land and then you have to write these report cards and you don’t really have any kind of numbers per se, and I’m still working through that.” She also shared her concerns that parents are sometimes not included in discussions related to the shift to formative assessment practices, leaving individual teachers to try to explain, and sometimes defend, the importance of this approach to teaching and learning.

SOME FORWARD LOOKING POSSIBILITIES

While it is not possible for outside researchers to make recommendations, they did see that there was a great deal of possibility for further action following the project. In conversations with participating

administrators in the fall of 2015, all three school divisions were moving forward with a continued focus on assessment as, and for, learning. Assessment remains a key focus for the divisions.

Participants indicated the importance of continuing to make assessment for/as learning a strong focus in establishing school cultures in their schools. The researchers saw that the focus on collaborative practices of professional learning where school administrators learn alongside teachers and students was a very positive direction. Participating teachers and school administrators drew attention to these reciprocal and mutual ways of learning. It was also apparent through the stories shared by administrators, that the strength of the project was in keeping the focus in school change on school administrators' professional learning.

The researchers also noted the openness of the coaching model that has been developed through the AAC project. Beginning with where each administrator is in his/her learning allows their professional learning to have the most impact in their practices. In conversations with administrators and teachers, they all noted there was strength in working *with*, rather than working *on*, or by imposing pre-specified and pre-determined goals or outcomes. With the flexibility and strength that knowledgeable and skilled coaches can bring, and as exemplified by the AAC coach, there is power in a more generative and relational practice of professional learning.

The researchers were struck by the sense of agency that teachers and school-based administrators experienced in the coaching model developed and used by the AAC project. It is clearly an innovative approach to coaching that is grounded in the realities of each particular school and staff. The research team anticipates that the developmental work around the coaching model will continue and will be shared in publications and workshops in Alberta and elsewhere as it has a great deal to offer to professional learning and to conceptions of school change and reform.