

Enabling Teacher Leadership through Educational Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This article was developed following a ten-month case study that explored how teacher leadership was manifested in a K-12 independent school. The researchers then conducted an oral history dialogue with the school's founder to understand how his vision influenced the establishment of this specialized school for students with learning disabilities and how that vision continues to shape the school. Five themes emerged from the oral history: 1) vision and need for a specialized school; 2) teacher knowledge and expertise; 3) relationship building and trust; 4) social and political acumen; and 5) independence to support innovation. These results highlight how educational entrepreneurship from those who are not educators can contribute to ameliorating educational challenges by establishing an environment where teacher leaders can thrive.

Résumé

Cet article a été rédigé à la suite d'une étude de cas de dix mois qui a exploré la manière dont le leadership par les enseignants se manifestait dans une école indépendante accueillant des élèves de la maternelle à la douzième année. Les chercheurs ont ensuite mené un entretien de type « histoire orale » avec le fondateur de l'école afin de comprendre comment sa vision avait influencé la création de cette école spécialisée pour les élèves présentant des troubles d'apprentissage et comment cette vision continuait à façonner l'école. Cinq thèmes se sont dégagés de son histoire orale :

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1) la vision et la nécessité d'une école spécialisée; 2) les connaissances et l'expertise des enseignants; 3) l'établissement de relations et la confiance; 4) l'aptitude politique et sociale; et 5) l'indépendance pour soutenir l'innovation. Ces résultats soulignent comment, en éducation, l'esprit d'entreprise de la part de personnes qui ne sont pas des éducateurs peut aider à surmonter les défis éducatifs en créant un environnement propice à l'épanouissement des enseignants leaders.

Keywords / Mots clés : teacher leadership, educational entrepreneurship, oral history, private/independent school, learning disabilities, school founder, innovation / leadership par les enseignants, entrepreneuriat éducatif, histoire orale, école privée/in-dépendante, troubles d'apprentissage, fondateur d'école, innovation

Introduction

This is an oral history report of how teacher leadership was facilitated and supported over several decades by a philanthropist in one independent school—Cypress School—founded to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. It addresses the uncommon connection between private sector entrepreneurship and shared educational decision-making.

The oral history findings are significant due to often-polarized views about the role of independent schools vis-à-vis public and parochial schools. Only a small number of reports of teacher leadership in independent schools are evident (Maddox, 2024; Westbrook, 2001), suggesting that teacher leaders in independent schools (Willis, Churchward, Crosswell, Spooner-Lane, Wise, & Jessen, 2022) remain an understudied component of school leadership. The importance of this report is magnified by long standing debates (Webber & Lupart, 2011) on the rights of students with learning challenges to be included in regular classrooms with appropriate support versus the potential benefits of special settings where educational initiatives can be aligned with students' unique learning needs.

The founder of Cypress School, here called John, reflected on his use of private sector experience to develop Cypress School in a manner that built upon teachers' knowledge and expertise. He sought to address the needs of learners who struggled in mainstream schools with learning, skill acquisition, and self-confidence. The oral history built on a prior professional relationship the researchers had with the school founder and strove to articulate the founder's motivations for establishing the school, his understanding of schooling for students with unique learning needs, and his trust and reliance on the professional acumen of the educators and professional staff in the school. The following report profiles the founder's vision for the school, based partly on his own child's frustrating experience as a learner with special needs. It describes the early exploration by the founder, and by the team of community members that formed around him, of North American schools for students with unique learning needs.

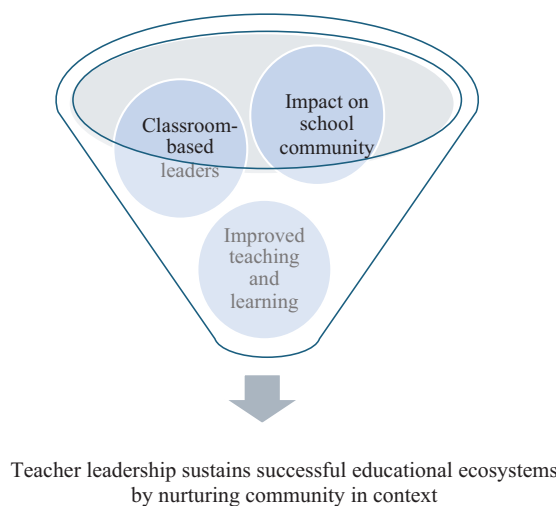
Conceptual framework

Researchers have struggled to define teacher leadership. One widely recognized definition of teacher leaders is those “who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching re-

sponsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 55). Another is that teacher leadership is “the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, pp. 287–288). A simpler definition of teacher leadership is that it is teachers influencing others (Schott, van Roekel, & Tummars, 2020), but a general explanation can obscure the contextualized manifestations of teacher leadership (Webber & Nickel, 2023).

Figure 1 depicts the operational description of teacher leadership that emerged from the oral history: *teacher leadership sustains successful educational ecosystems by nurturing community in context.*

Figure 1. Operational description of teacher leadership



Teacher leadership is one critical element in an educational ecosystem shaped and guided by its members, which, in the case of Cypress School, included the school’s founder. This study explored the founding vision that set the context for strong teacher leadership within a *community of leadership* (Murphy, 2023). Exploration of the role of the founder in facilitating teacher leadership in Cypress School provided insights into the notion of *contextual literacy*, that is, responding to the unique context (Fullan, 2021).

Shared leadership is uniquely challenging for those supporting diverse learning needs. Extensive research has focused on the effective practices of teacher leaders who organize schools for inclusion, build professional capacity, and encourage high-quality learning experiences for students with diverse learning needs (Billingsley & Banks, 2019; DeMatthews, Serafini, & Watson, 2021; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). Schools promoting inclusive education should foster innovation and entrepreneurship (Hamburg & Bucksch, 2017). However, schools may be stymied by limited professional capacity and school cultures that do not support innovation necessary to address the needs of students with learning disabilities (Charalampous, 2020; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021). In addition to developing teachers’ technical knowledge to implement evidence-based approaches for teaching students with learning disabilities, leaders may need to navigate teacher resistance to change.

Entrepreneurial thinking in educational contexts may be informed by problem-solving in the business community including learning from failure. Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) followed three principals who learned from failure in their efforts to create inclusive schools for students with disabilities. The authors acknowledge that much of the research on learning from failure emerges from business management scholarship and this related body of research informed their study. They describe three types of failure to support students with disabilities: *preventable failure* that is foreseen and unacceptable (often due to attitudes and relationships that did not support inclusion), *complexity-related failure* that can be expected even with appropriate safeguards simply because the contexts are so complicated, and *intelligent failure* that results in a setting with many unknowns where experimentation is necessary to discern the best steps.

Individualized program planning (Alberta Education, 2006) requires the analysis of failure: “plan, review progress, identify shortcomings, and adjust as necessary” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021, p. 519). To build a culture of professional learning and continuous improvement, Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) recommend schools face failure not by identifying *who did it?* but rather by analyzing *what happened?* In the context of trusting relationships, analysis of failures by teacher leaders can provide an opportunity for growth and improvement.

Scott and Webber (2012) suggest that educational leadership should be more entrepreneurial, and they outline several dimensions of socially responsible educational entrepreneurship. While educators may settle for the status quo, entrepreneurial thinking requires innovative behaviour including generating new skills and knowledge, “possibilizing” new futures (Webber & Robertson, 1998), social and political acumen to foster productive relationships, and technical skills. Further, educational entrepreneurs engage in boundary breaking: “the capacity to move learning beyond the boundaries normally imposed by cultures, roles, institutions, economics, and national borders” (Webber & Robertson, 1998, p. 13).

Context

Cypress School has operated for over 40 years as a K-12 independent school in a large Canadian city. From an initial population of 44 students taught by 11 staff in five classrooms in a rented facility, 150 staff now serve over 700 students in a modern purpose-built facility on 16 acres within the city limits. Cypress School is governed by a board of directors drawn mostly from the corporate sector but also from academia. School funding combines operating grants from the provincial department of education, tuition fees, philanthropic donations, and proceeds generated by a parent-operated fundraising committee. School operations are led by a team of certificated educators with national and international teaching and leadership experiences, plus an unusually high number of graduate degrees completed and in progress. The school leadership group includes a chief executive officer, a K-12 principal, and assistant principals for junior and senior grades.

The program intended for students with learning disabilities offers a student-staff ratio of 8:1 in K-8, and 10:1 in grades 9-12. Another stream for students who may or may not have learning disabilities offers student-staff ratios that are twice

as large. There is also a hybrid in-person and online program for learners in grades 9 to 12.

A unique feature of the formal leadership team is its coordinated focus on complementary student and teacher learning; the two assistant principals are responsible for leading teachers' professional growth, in collaboration with another senior leader charged with optimizing student learning. This professional learning team supports subject and grade-level meetings guided by collectively developed work plans. The plans include clear instructional goals, explicit timelines, and connections to the provincial curriculum and the provincially mandated teacher quality standard framework. Cypress School staff members include teachers who serve as literacy and numeracy coaches for their colleagues, occupational therapists, and psychologists. Every new teacher is assigned an experienced mentor to facilitate understanding of the "Cypress Way" of operating, which places individual student needs at the heart of all decisions and promotes an unequivocal sense of optimism.

Multiple examples of how the school mission and vision statements permeate day-to-day life are evident throughout the school. Signage in hallways and classrooms emphasizes the beliefs and values that underpin expectations for students and teachers. Technology use by students and staff is ubiquitous. The physical environment is permeated by furniture designed for children with learning differences related to attention spans, anxiety, dyslexia, etc. There are wheeled chairs, hallway seating spaces designed to facilitate student dialogue, wobbly and stationary stools, standing desks, and soundproof workspaces. Instead of typical tiling and carpeting, classrooms have laminate flooring chosen to allow for the quiet movement of wheeled seating. Students are supported by scribes and readers as needed. One of the formal leadership team members declared that "everything is intentional."

Methods

This oral history was part of the International Study of Teacher Leadership (ISTL), a multi-site project undertaken in 12 countries (www.mru.ca/istl). The primary research question was: *How is teacher leadership conceptualized and enacted, and what are the implications for educational stakeholders?* The multi-stage design explored how educational organizations articulated their perceptions of teacher leadership. After exploring understandings of teacher leadership held by research team members, smaller teams conducted interviews and questionnaires at specific school sites in their respective countries. In addition, case studies explored how teacher leadership was enacted and supported by formal and informal school leaders. Finally, a range of oral histories was completed; many of these histories, this one included, highlighted the attributes of leaders who exercised powerful influences within school communities. Previous research findings were published in guest edited issues of journals (Conway, 2023; Okoko & Webber, 2021) and an edited book (Webber, 2023).

Oral history allows researchers to collect memories and personal experiences of significant events (Ritchie, 2014). Further, Ritchie (2014) wrote that "people remember best what was most exciting and important to them; their most vivid memories are often of the earliest days of their careers when events were fresh and invigorating" (p. 37).

John had vivid memories of the school's early years and the animating vision that sustained him and his team and ultimately developed teacher leadership in Cypress School. John was a respected community leader, businessperson, and philanthropist, recognized for his efforts in a wide range of national and international causes. The founding of Cypress School was just one of his philanthropic endeavours.

The focus of the interview questions was derived from a literature review of teacher leadership (Webber, 2021) and analyses of local documents related to teacher leadership (Webber & Nickel, 2021). The qualitative analysis for this oral history was based on formal and informal conversations plus a structured interview with the founder of Cypress School. Analysis was informed by an extensive case study of the school, plus interviews with numerous teacher leaders in that school (Webber & Nickel, 2022; Webber, Nickel, Hamilton, & Braunberger, 2024) to corroborate the story from various points of view. So, while the discrete interview transcript provided the primary data for analysis, the broader study informed the interview questions posed and the interpretation of the data.

The interview opened with a short description of the study (interviews with teacher leaders and a year-long case study of the school operations). The researchers explained that they wanted to understand how this intriguing working environment was founded and how its success was maintained. Then, John was asked to describe his motivation for founding Cypress School, what prepared him for success in this endeavour, the shared beliefs that he and other founders brought to the work, and key players who influenced the school's progress over the last four decades. Next, interview questions shifted to the current organizational culture, the roles of the leadership team, and the frameworks that they sought to maintain.

The researchers were able to share key quotes from case study interviews with teacher leaders that captured the participants' strong sense of professional engagement. John was asked to comment on these quotes and on how the leadership team recruited such engaged staff. Further, he was invited to reflect upon the features of Cypress School that made him proud and issues that caused him worry. Finally, the interview closed by asking John to comment on the provincial context, the advantages and disadvantages of being an independent school, and how teacher education programs might best prepare candidates to work in school settings where cultivating teacher leadership is an explicit goal.

Once the interview was transcribed, the two researchers independently coded the content of the oral history transcript. The codes were compared and collaboratively analyzed to derive five key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Erickson, 1986; Patton, 2002).

Despite efforts to be as objective as possible, the researchers acknowledge that "it is only human for them to choose what to pay attention to, what to play down, and what to disregard entirely" (Ritchie, 2014, p. 13). Representative quotes add to the credibility of the interpretation, but the report nevertheless provides the authors' interpretations of the interview and includes the ideas they deemed most salient.

The researchers' university research ethics board and the school's leadership team approved the study, and the interviewee signed a release to permit the oral history data to be included in ISTL reports.

Limitations

This oral history is shared with the knowledge that it is subject to the limitations associated with oral history per se and of qualitative research in general. The researchers approached the study using an interpretive framework, understanding that both they and the study participant brought their values and beliefs to their interactions (Mwita, 2022). Further, the study was bounded by John's age, gender, and prior community experiences, which limit the transferability of the study findings (Given, 2016). Similar boundaries were imposed by the researchers' individual attributes and experiences.

Additional limitations included the past experiences of the researchers in public and independent schools in Canada and internationally. Each researcher drew upon prior knowledge and a personal "propriospect," that is a "unique version of culture each of us creates out of individual experience ... the aggregated versions of all the cultural settings or activities of which any one human is aware" (Wolcott, 1991, p. 258). This means the researchers shared some perspectives while potentially being unaware of how the nuances of their propriospects shaped interpretations of their interactions with John.

The reliability of oral history as a research methodology has been contested, although it has been employed extensively since the 1800s and in varied international contexts. Given (2008) observes that "Oral history provides information that cannot be gleaned from any other sources, and it gives voice to ordinary and often marginalized peoples whose stories might never have been documented otherwise" (p. 584).

Findings

The oral history offered five key insights into John's perceptions of why he and his team of parents and educators sought to develop Cypress School. In addition, he explained his understanding of why the school has operated successfully for over 40 years as an independent school for students with learning differences. The five themes that emerged are: 1) based on the educational experiences of his own son, the founder identified a *need* and established a *vision* for a school that would meet the needs of students with learning disabilities; 2) he prioritized the development of *teacher knowledge and expertise* and sought resources to support that development; 3) *relationship building and trust* in those with educational expertise were integral to the school's establishment and emerging initiatives; 4) his *social and political acumen* developed as a successful business leader informed school *governance* and provided the strategic direction to persevere through logistical challenges; and 5) *independence* as a private school provided the context for *innovation*, risk-taking, and sharing of knowledge.

Need and vision

John's motivation to open the school began with an issue that was close to his heart: the desire to make a difference in the lives of students like his son who had a learning disability. Education for students with learning disabilities was in a nascent stage in the 1970s when John's son was a student. John described the services that supported students with learning disabilities in that time period:

But they weren't really doing the job. It was just getting started. All these children were pretty smart kids with average to superior IQs but they just weren't functioning in the system. They learned in different ways and we didn't understand a lot of that. We had an industrial system in our education system. If you were average or above already you could do just great. But it didn't have enough variability to handle the humans that were coming in the door, in our opinion.

In the 1970s, there was a local movement in public schools to shift students with learning disabilities out of segregated classrooms and into regular classrooms (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2015). However, integration was accompanied by a need for teacher professional development and often was met with concerns from parents of children without exceptionalities. Further, parents of children with learning disabilities worried about instructional effectiveness and social acceptance of their children (Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber, & Lupart, 2009).

Frustrated by an ineffectual system, John's son was the first of several local students who travelled to study in a school in the United States, where a specialized program finally met their learning needs. Sending children away to school was very stressful for families and inspired John to establish Cypress School locally in the model of the American school.

I think that the reason that (Cypress) is a pretty special place is that it had to be a pretty special place. We were dealing with special children. So I think that the roots of the special qualities of the school were mandated by the special students and the special teachers that we had to successfully address the issues from the get-go. And we recognized that. We were committed to have a school that could bring the value out of these kids and we were absolutely committed to make that happen.

Today there are numerous local programs to support students with learning disabilities, but these options were absent or underdeveloped in the years when John was envisioning Cypress School.

Teacher knowledge and expertise

John recognized that he needed to trust the wisdom of educational experts. In the late 1970s, when the potential for a local school was being explored, the team visited numerous schools throughout North America to examine their organizational structures, protocols, and instructional practices. They settled upon one that achieved exemplary results and where teaching was informed by research-based practices. John arranged for teachers from the American school to travel to Cypress to help establish the new school.

We weren't just going to teach math better or teach science better. We knew the teaching protocols had to be started almost from scratch. And so the teachers were critical. I mean we couldn't get teachers that had a lot of experience in this field because it was a

brand-new field. So, we had really smart teachers. From the very beginning with professional development and teacher training, there was a recognition that these teachers brought specialized expertise to be able to manage the [learners who] are sitting there in front of them—all these kids! The protocols, the teaching processes that we started off with were grafted onto our school from the [American school].

Establishing a reputation as the best local school for students with learning differences is a mountain that Cypress School continually aspires to summit. “And we’re not going to get there unless we’ve got the best teachers and the best processes and the best support systems.”

During the oral history interview, the researchers shared with John some quotes from published interviews (Webber et al., 2024) that were conducted with teacher leaders at Cypress School:

“We do not leave kids on the side of the road.”

“The learning team really tries to hold people to evidence-based practice.”

“There’s a responsibility that we have to students . . . to make sure we are doing the right things for the right reasons.”

The researchers asked John how Cypress School attracts, supports, and retains such passionate teachers. He admitted that hiring the right people is a challenge but also an opportunity. Outstanding practicum students “catch our eye” and the hiring process had multiple steps to ensure they hire well. Once hired, there is significant support for teachers including peer mentorship, supportive evaluation, and professional development focused on improving student outcomes. John reiterated the importance of listening to teachers, trusting them, and empowering them. Based on interview data reported elsewhere (Webber et al., 2024), teachers embraced this sense of empowerment and trust. John admitted that attrition of teachers is to be expected and even celebrated when they are attracted by new professional challenges. “I want [other] people to want our people. Think of the opposite!”

Relationship building and trust

The success of the school can be attributed in large part to the quality of relationships and the trust formed with individuals engaged in leading the school. John explained,

I never was the smartest person in the room, but I wanted to find who was the smartest person in the room. And I wanted to ask him for a little advice. That’s the most precious thing. They love it. You’re honoring them and it develops trust . . . I had to trust Harvey. I had to trust Paul. They were the professionals. We had the business case. We had to get the money. We were the connectors but ultimately, they were the ones we depended on for the substance of the professional status of the school.

John’s recognition of the need to build trust with the team of community members and educators who developed Cypress School reflects Burns’ (1978) description of

transformational leadership that satisfies followers' needs and motivates them to higher performance. Hauserman and Stick (2014) describe transformational leaders as those who emphasize teamwork and collegiality and inspire teachers, a function that John fulfilled in his role as a school founder.

Central to the oral history is the role of the founder and his team's attention to trust and positive relationships. These features facilitated the influence of classroom-based educators throughout the school community and beyond. The founder offered his entrepreneurial belief that:

The classroom is not where you're supposed to start. The classroom is where you should end. What you really need to do is go down here and develop a social platform with parents and [community leaders]. What kind of school do you want for your children? What would you recommend that we consider? What are your thoughts about how we can strengthen our relationships?

For many years, John had lunch with individual teachers to learn about their daily practice, initiatives, and challenges; he explained how these conversations with teachers often influenced conversations in the boardroom. Relationship building extended to parents and community members. "We want to have a dialogue with the community. Whether it's parking, noise, kids, you name it. We want to get ahead of issues. We don't want to let the issues submerge us."

Learning communities where students feel safe and accepted are dependent on parent and community support (Loreman et al., 2009). John's attention to relationship building with Cypress School parents and community members reflected the knowledge and skills he acquired in his role as a businessperson who was highly involved in numerous other community development initiatives.

Knowing the school has made a difference has been rewarding for John. He described a stranger approaching him and asking, "Are you John, associated with Cypress School? I want you to know that that school pulled our kid out of the ditch." John reasoned, "It isn't just a child, the visible one, but there's a lot of other people that succeed along with that child. The grandmother, and the grandfather, and aunts and uncles and friends. That's the way we get payback." John refused to accept much credit for the success of Cypress School, but it is clear that boldness has underpinned his choices so teachers, students, and families benefited from his vision.

Social and political acumen

John openly admitted that he had "no knowledge of the tactical realities of how to start a school like Cypress School." However,

I had the strategic background of the need and of the special teachers. I visited the [American school]. I could see they did things differently than we normally were doing up here. And I knew the [specialized service] wasn't working with our boy.

John reported that his work in establishing Cypress School required "diligence and listening very hard." His insight into the importance of understanding context is supported by Clarke and O'Donoghue's (2017) observation that successful educational

change initiatives demand a thorough knowledge of culture and the ability to comprehend stakeholders' perspectives.

John underscored the importance of resilience in managing unprecedented changes. In the early years, Cypress School rented space in a variety of vacant schools. Often their space for the subsequent year was uncertain until a few months before classes resumed; at one point they were located in four schools over five years. This transience created significant stress for teachers, students, and parents, and also for John and the leadership team:

It was hard on us coming up with a business plan when we didn't know what school we were going to be in. We came to the point where we were either going to build a place like this and be sustainable or we simply weren't going to be able to sustain the operation. We were lucky to find this place and the rest is history!

"This place" refers to the site of the current Cypress School building constructed about 30 years ago.

Initially, the school they built had only 30 to 40 students and fewer grades than the current K-12 composition. As the school grew to its present population of over 700 students, they were "dealing with more, more everything from transportation to capital to operating costs to business plans to everything." While the first school leader was a "start-up guy," the second supported "business development." Under the leadership of the latter, the school grew in size and reputation and a range of other schools began using Cypress School protocols. "Our teachers would go down (to those schools). That proved to be a great opportunity for the teachers to see other children, to see other administrations, to see other jurisdictions and how they're dealing with issues." The benefits of the professional learning provided to Cypress School teachers are consistent with Woodcock's (2014) findings that educators are more sympathetic toward students with learning disabilities when they gain experience working with and learning about students with special educational needs.

Independence and innovation

John distinguished between *schools of choice* and *schools of need* and stressed the importance of risk-taking in the context of an independent school. His comments reflect the contested nature of school choice in Canada (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2018; Chami Lindsay, 2024). Those in favour of school choice have argued that parents have the right to choose how and where their children are educated, while others state that school choice privileges families with higher income and social acumen.

While planning a school focus, John and his team concurrently gathered and organized information related to instructional programs that aligned with the provincial program of studies. They developed profiles of the teachers they needed, organized a business plan that was initially fragile but subsequently sustainable, identified rental facilities, and confirmed start-up funds by working with financial institutions and sponsors. This work had to be completed before teachers could be hired and children registered.

John's perspective is that "We're dealing with children who have not performed to their potential so we're a school of need. I'm not here to defend the schools of

choice.” Independent school status was also important for autonomy and the privilege of risk-taking in order to innovate. John described Cypress School as “big enough to have an impact and we’re small enough to [be able] to change direction.”

It was terribly important that we run a fiscally responsible and strong organization because then we run it. If you aren’t fiscally strong and somebody has to bail you out or you have other problems or whatever, you lose. You lose that independence. And if we lost our independence, we couldn’t take any risk and if you can’t take any risk you can’t make any progress. It was almost that simple. Being private allows us to take risks that in the public system would be harder to take because somebody’d be out there criticizing if they fail. We can afford to fail. When we fail, I don’t mean that the child fails. We never go into a program where we risk the future of a child. We’ve got backup programs and we monitor them constantly and if things seem to be getting a little wobbly then we’re in there quick. But we can do things in a private environment that is a smaller, stronger organization than the bigger organizations and the public. And then we can proliferate for the benefits of society at large. Let us try and if it doesn’t work, we’ll eat it. And if it does [work], we’ll share it.

In keeping with his philanthropic values, John was committed to making the school accessible to those who could not afford the tuition.

We can price the school lower and then have public fundraising every year to get the money we need, or you can price the school where it should be and then you can help people get there. And we chose the latter because you have to be fiscally independent or else you’ll lose the independence of your strategy.

Through the school’s parent association, students with a demonstrated need can apply for bursaries to support tuition costs. Since the mid-1980s, this fund has provided over \$5 million in student bursaries. Current communications from Cypress School reflect John’s unconventional approach to educational leadership, demonstrated by this statement in one of the school’s recent public documents: “Simply put, we do things differently around here.”

Discussion

Four central elements were evident in John’s story. First, John’s influence was a major factor in the development and sustainability of Cypress School. Second, the school has functioned for over four decades as a distinctive community of leadership. A third dimension was the set of values that guide the governance and operation of Cypress School. A fourth major element was the capacity of Cypress School to navigate the polarized views of independent schools in Canada.

John’s enduring influence

Teacher leadership is situational (Elonga Mboyo, 2021; Evers & Lakomski, 2022), so

it is difficult to understand Cypress School without understanding John's influence. The researchers know of no other person who has been so consistently present in an independent, public, or parochial school for so long, particularly a parent and community member. John's action-oriented personality and decision-making capacity allowed him to engage others in creating a school for children with learning differences. The people who joined John in the school planning and development process were other community influencers who could help garner the necessary human, financial, and educational resources. John was a leader whose cross-sector acumen and social confidence gave him credibility in business, finance, and education.

The cultural norms in Cypress School of respect for educators' expertise, teamwork, and mutual trust require teacher leaders who may not be accepted in other settings because of their proclivity to serve as change agents. As Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) note, trust and respect are critical for successful innovation necessary in special school settings.

John's hands-on leadership has shaped the school from its beginning, manifested by his participation on the board of directors, consistent reading of educational research, and weekly visits to the school. His presence has influenced who has served in senior educational leadership roles, staffing decisions, provision of professional development for teachers, acquisition of land for the school, construction of Cypress School, financial planning, and school accreditation. Over the years, John has participated in strategic planning activities that involve board members, teachers, senior school leaders, parents, academics, community members, and students. John's influence on the school's vision and mission has been consistent for over four decades.

Community of leadership

John's participation in the oral history clarified how his vision for the school contributed to its positive culture and long history of shared leadership. From its early years, John and his team hired innovative and curious educators who were open to learning from new theories and research. He encouraged and supported their ongoing professional development. He respected the teachers and trusted them to hold themselves and each other to high performance standards.

The researchers knew from their earlier research in Cypress School (Webber & Nickel, 2022) that the school culture was based on shared leadership between formal leaders and teacher leaders. The workplace was characterized by pervasive positivity and cohesion. Staff members held high expectations for one another, and effective communication processes were used and protected. Support structures included a collective vision for the school established through an inclusive strategic planning process and maintained by widely understood decision-making procedures.

The community of leaders in Cypress School fostered high levels of altruism and commitment to learners and colleagues. Because they were trusted, teacher leaders engaged authentically in planning, instructional improvement, and decision-making. They achieved a productive tension between professional autonomy and shared leadership.

John's reliance on teacher knowledge and expertise is aligned with reports of how teachers with a range of complex learners in their classrooms benefit from collaboration with colleagues and shared planning time (DeMatthews et al., 2021;

McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Lea Cizman, & Lupart, 2013), both of which are observable components of Cypress School. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2016) describe teacher leaders as classroom-based teachers who exercise influence throughout their school communities. Friesen and Brown (2022) expand this to include a focus on improving teaching and learning by mentoring and facilitating the improvement of other teachers. John's trust in teachers clearly enabled these elements of teacher leadership.

Values

John's statements contained implicit values that are part of his worldview and reflected in the school culture. Signage throughout the school emphasized the expectation that learners and all staff members will interact respectfully and in ways that demonstrate honesty, sincerity, and integrity. Enthusiastic commitment to the school community was an expectation and so was a selfless concern for others. Indeed, the school's public documents explicitly stated that its values are "a way of life" for everyone in the organization.

Cypress School was an educational context where it was safe for teachers to explore the creative and entrepreneurial dimensions of their profession. Earlier ISTL research findings indicated that teacher leaders in some settings can resist being socialized in ways that impede creative teaching (see also DeMatthews et al., 2021); however, the researchers observed that Cypress School teachers socialized one another to accept and manifest the school founder's values, which are de facto the organization's values. High regard for altruistic behaviour aligns with the over CDN\$5 million in bursaries awarded to Cypress School students. A number of Cypress School graduates have returned to the school as classroom teachers suggesting they respected the community values of the school.

Polarized views

School choice is "one of the most contentious issues in education" (Glinos, 2021, p. 155). Described by some as the enactment of neoliberalism, school choice is said to reinforce socioeconomic and racial privilege (Chami Lindsay, 2024; Yoon, 2024). Others (Farney & Banack, 2023) more positively interpret school choice as a response to Article 26 of the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*, which states that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (United Nations, 1948, Article 26).

Canadians have struggled with faith-based schools (McDonough, Memon, & Mintz, 2013) since the *British North America Act of 1867* safeguarded Protestant and Roman Catholic schools and allocated responsibility for education to provinces. Since then, debates have flourished around the establishment of charter schools (Government of Alberta, 2021), French immersion schools (Barrett DeWiele & Edgerton, 2021), residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), and inclusive and special education programs (Jahnukainen, Maich, Penney, & Young, 2022). Educational research reports and teacher union statements contain multiple arguments against school choice (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2017; Maharaj, Tuters, & Shah, 2024; Wilkinson, 2024; Yoon, 2024).

The researchers noted in their case study of the school and the oral history dialogue with John that no one introduced references to contentious debates present in the larger Canadian society about public versus independent schools or about inclusive education versus segregated learning. Instead, members of the Cypress School community operated in a context where they focused first on providing evidence-based learning opportunities that addressed the province's mandated curriculum and, second, on the values that helped each student succeed. John described Cypress School as a school of need because students needed the school to help overcome challenges experienced in previously learning environments. John regarded the school's independent status as integral for innovation.

Cypress School appeared as a refuge from contested dialogue about school choice and a context where teachers are empowered to lead. Teacher leaders in Cypress School focused their energy on the educational welfare of students while avoiding the politicization that is sometimes directed toward leaders of independent schools (Webber & Nickel, 2023).

Conclusion

The primary research question guiding the research was: *How is teacher leadership conceptualized and enacted, and what are the implications for educational stakeholders?* The findings of the oral history conducted with John highlighted how he understood leadership generally and applied that knowledge, despite being educated in another field and spending his professional career in the private sector. His interest in educational leadership originated in his experience as a parent, which fostered his investigation of teaching and learning for students with learning disabilities. His background in the private sector led him to apply his interest in educational leadership in the context of an independent school. Thus, John's conceptualization of teacher leadership was different from how more traditional leaders in the public education system understand and enact the concept.

A secondary research question was: *How do systems leaders conceptualize teacher leadership?* John's role as co-founder of an independent school may be perceived as parallel to that of a systems leader. The oral history findings suggested that, while John trusted teachers' knowledge and expertise, he recognized the value of his experience in finance, business, and private sector sustainability. Therefore, study findings support the provocative idea that teacher leadership can be sponsored by individuals who normally would be perceived as external to a school community.

John's role in the development and sustenance of Cypress School pushed the boundaries of how teacher leadership might be understood and applied. Teacher leadership and private sector entrepreneurship may share transferable attributes and values. Study findings challenge the commonly used definition of teacher leadership as the influence of classroom-based teachers. They suggest that teacher leadership can be considered the reciprocal influence of individuals and groups within school communities and from the larger community.

Another secondary research question was: *What are the values, beliefs, and assumptions underpinning teacher leadership discourses?* Study findings demonstrated John's conviction that relationship building and mutual trust are essential compo-

nents of instructional improvement. His taken-for-granted assumption was that children's needs should be paramount in educational settings. He ensured that decision-making about school governance, financial sustainability, professional development for educators, and personalized learning were premised on the belief that children deserved optimal conditions for learning.

Educational leaders in Canada may be less likely to gravitate toward the formation of an independent school and more apt to develop programs for special needs learners within public schools—the context they know best. However, for John, the decision to found an independent school emerged because he had the knowledge and skills that made him successful in the private sector but may not have had the knowledge or even the access to found a program for learning disabilities with a public school system.

The researchers do not declare that Cypress School should be an exemplar for serving all students with special learning needs. However, this description of Cypress School and its founder raises questions for possible future research. For instance, is John correct that the school's success can be ascribed to its structure as an independent school? What aspects of the school are transferable to other forms of schools, such as public, charter, faith-based, and home schools? Is teacher leadership inherently entrepreneurial?

Finally, the following inclusive description of teacher leadership is offered in response to long standing calls to clarify the meaning of teacher leadership.

Teacher leadership sustains successful educational ecosystems by nurturing community in context.

By this definition, this oral history suggests that John is a teacher leader because of the central role he played in creating a successful educational ecosystem, nurturing a strong community of teacher leaders, and creating a school that addressed a gap in the educational context of the time.

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