SERVANT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

by

Heather M. Elliott

Bachelor of Education, UBC, 2003

MAJOR PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL

FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

(EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP)

In the
Teacher Education Department

UNIVERSITY OF THE FRASER VALLEY

2021

Approval

Name: Heather M. Elliott
Degree: Master of Education (Educational Leadership and Mentorship)
Title: Servant leadership strategies and their impact on teacher professional learning.

Examining Committee

Name: Dr. Awneet Sivia
GPC Chair
MEd Chair, Teacher Education Department

_____

Name: Dr. Sheryl MacMath
Senior Supervisor
Professor, Teacher Education Department

_____

Name: Chris Campbell
Second Reader
Department Head, Adult Education Department

_____

Date Defended/Approved: June 5, 2021

Abstract

This study investigates servant leadership characteristics and their impact on teacher professional learning. This research targets the subject area of Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies (ADST) from the revised BC Ministry of Education curriculum in 2016. This phenomenological study used a purposeful sampling of participants that, through a series of interviews, explored their professional learning experiences using a servant leadership lens. As ADST is a recently created content area, supporting literature came from the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM); Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM); and Project Based Learning (PBL). This paper looks at how elements of servant leadership can build a solid foundation of relational trust and support for those teaching in ADST. Furthermore, it examines how that foundation can have an impact on teacher professional learning and growth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my participants and colleagues for supporting my research, without them none of this would have been possible.

An extra-large MEOW to my supervisor Sheryl – Thank you.

Thank you to my second reader Chris.

Dedication

To my wonderful husband Brandon and beautiful daughters, Olivia & Abigail, this is for you with love.

&

For Mike, you believed I could, so I did.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Acronyms

i. ADST Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies

ii. PBL Project Based Learning

iii. STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math

iv. STEAM Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math

Introduction

I have spent the last 17 years working as an Applied Skills Teacher in the public-school system, specifically as a metal fabrication and drafting and design teacher. To meet the degree requirements to become a Technology Education teacher it was necessary to complete a two-year diploma in technology teacher education, or TTED, through the British Columbia Institute of Technology. This allowed for a specialty teaching area in applied skills and it provided me with the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to safely work with students using large scale power equipment and hand tools.

In the first few years of my career, it seemed apparent to me that "shop" class was not a priority for many schools and their administrators. It was not perceived as being valued in the same way as the traditional academic subjects were. Many students in my class often struggled with their reading and written output, and had issues with behavior and attendance. There were other educators in the building that felt these students were at risk of not being able to graduate at all. It took me a long time to wrestle with the idea that some students were perceived as being more competent than others, and I refused to let that be the path for the students in my classes. I made a choice early on in my career to connect with my students through hands-on making and learning. It was important for me to have students in my classes feel empowered to be successful, and that hands-on learning and skill development were just as valued as traditional academic learning. Non-traditional pathways to graduation were still pathways to success, they just looked different.

My goal as an early career teacher was always to have just one student each year be as passionate about hands-on learning as I. Upon reflection, I know there were so many more students than that who had left my classroom as graduates feeling good about themselves,

passionate, and ready for a future in trades. For me, the largest shift in my thinking and teaching style all started with one very special grad class. In 2008, after teaching for five years, I was assigned a group of Grade 12 students to my home room. They were all at risk of not graduating in some way, and my administration team felt I had a connection to them. Though it was a smaller group than my colleagues had, it was a group with a lot of diverse needs. The students were assigned to me for 30 minutes every day, in addition to at least one of the Applied Skills courses I taught. We started our growth slowly, by just getting to know each other and ourselves. At the time, all students had to complete a course called Graduation Transitions to successfully meet their Grade 12 requirements. This course, in our building, was delivered through a paper-based booklet during home room. I chose this booklet as the path to connect with my students. We completed the booklet together, reading aloud the questions and discussing the answers as a group. It gave me insight into who they were and where they needed support. It broke down any barriers that had been formed through learning difficulties. It opened the door for difficult conversations, allowing them the opportunity to be vulnerable. My class was a safe space without judgment. We built relationships based on trust, truth, and respect. These students who had previously struggled to attend on a regular basis, now never missed a class without an explanation. We took on a variety of school-based projects that allowed them to showcase their skills and talents. Ten months of hard work and connection making left me with some of my best memories of being an educator. Each of those students successfully completed their Grade 12 requirements and graduated, all because of the relationships we made and the work we put in together. I believe relational trust was a key foundation of the success of that group.

Context

The last four years of my teaching career have been spent as a Curriculum Support teacher for our district Learning Services department. The job was a secondment from my teaching position and was a temporary placement. For me, in this role, the key to being successful was relational trust, though in this role it was trust built with my colleagues. My purpose was to provide support for all our teachers in the district with a specific focus on Applied Design, Skills, and Technology (ADST) and Career Education from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

One of the critical factors that affected my discipline area was the redesigned curriculum and additional layering of the First People's Principles of Learning. The impact on my secondary colleagues had been both inspiring for some and an enormous roadblock for others. For my elementary colleagues this was not just a redesigned curriculum, it was a brand-new curriculum and language. Additionally, this revised curriculum was newly mandatory for all elementary grades. My position in the district was created to support this shift within the redesigned curriculum. My job was about breaking down some of the barriers to the redesigned curriculum and providing sound educational practice through a variety of platforms. Sometimes it looked like co-teaching with an elementary trained teacher to guide them through a hands-on building activity with their students, sometimes it looked like developing a shared district scope and sequence document, and other times it was providing professional development workshops open to all district educators. It was important to me to acknowledge where our elementary and secondary partners were coming from. The relational piece for me was so important: I wanted to be someone who could and would help them in their journey with the curriculum. The goal for

me was to provide learning tools that would stand long after I moved back to my classroom. This was both a challenge and my vision for what I did in my job every day.

This role in the district led me to dig deeply into my own educational practice and experiences with professional learning and growth. When I first started, I found myself reflecting on what I liked and did not like when it came to my own learning. I had to think about how to engage with my fellow teachers and get them to sign-up for professional learning that was guided and directed by me. Who was I in the big picture of professional learning options? How was I going to reach out and connect with educators in their classrooms? Just like a high-school teacher who needed to recruit students to sign-up for an elective course, offering professional learning in an afterschool session was completely elective for the teachers in my district, and so was inviting me in to teach alongside them. This was a complex task.

The ADST curriculum at the grades nine to twelve level consisted of 66 different course options. Early in the job, this was extremely overwhelming as not only was I only familiar with about 25% of those course offerings, but I had limited experience, if any at all, at the kindergarten to grade eight level. How could I build quality professional learning opportunities when the focus group initially was a grade level that was unfamiliar to me? What would appropriate tools or equipment be? How could/would they be provided to teachers? To start, I spent a great deal of time researching the curriculum and what elementary teachers were being asked to do. Ultimately, I chose to pilot an ADST kit project in our elementary schools. One volunteer elementary teacher from each building in the district was supplied with a kit and resources to complete ADST activities, thus beginning the process of building relationships and trust with my colleagues. By the end of that first year, the ADST resources had reached over 180 teachers. The project was successful overall, having reached more teachers than the initial target,

but there were still challenges present. There were still teachers who did not understand my role, or who were unsure about having a guest in their classroom. Though the teachers involved in the pilot were experiencing growth and felt empowered in their own learning, it was my perception that there was still a great deal of my elementary partners who felt disconnected from ADST, and simply did not know where or how to begin.

When I began the master's program, my thought was that I would be more connected to the mentorship side of things. I had always associated leadership with administration, whereas mentorship has had a large impact on my career. Yet here I was finding myself drawn to the leadership side as I now saw it as larger than just administration. I realized that I approached my position in the district through a servant leadership lens. When looking at my research project I hoped to look at whether that particular leadership style impacted the successful collaborations I was having in my district, and in turn could it allow for further growth with even more colleagues?

I aimed to examine how leaders, including myself, had supported teacher professional learning using servant leadership as my conceptual framework. I wanted to understand more deeply the relationship between servant leadership and ADST, to look at the informal learning and mentorship that I believed was happening when I approached offering professional learning supports. I learned about the participants' experiences and was able to make recommendations in relation to best strategies and practice. There were two intended outcomes for my research. First, as a district curriculum support teacher, I aimed to improve my leadership skills and professional development practices. Second, I would be able to share what I learned with other district leaders to support their own professional practice. This led me to my research question of: In what ways do servant leadership strategies facilitate teacher professional learning?

Literature Review

The BC Ministry of Education introduced ADST for elementary teachers in 2016 (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). It had been newly included in the teaching requirements for elementary educators, just like Literacy and Numeracy. Though ADST has similarities with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM), in addition to elements common to Project-Based Learning (PBL), it is unique. STEM, STEAM, and PBL are often used as enhancements to preexisting curricula. ADST stands as an individual curriculum with specific competencies and content for each grade level. It is not something that is done as a single lesson never to be looked at again, nor is it to be viewed as a way to enrich another subject area of knowledge. It is a way to target student learning with hands-on activities and lessons that focus on critical and creative thinking opportunities. It is also mandated by the BC Ministry of Education as prescribed curriculum across all grade levels. ADST has a distinct focus on design thinking principles: context, defining, ideating, prototyping, testing, making, and sharing (BC Ministry of Education, 2021). Each of the subject areas that fall within ADST are based on the same three curricular content areas: applied design, applied skills, and applied technologies. With the introduction of this redesigned curriculum came the need for focused supports and resources.

Professional development is vital to supporting classroom teachers in new curriculum areas (Fullan et al., 2015). Beyond this, research around supporting teachers with STEM and STEAM reveal how critical it is for teachers to have strong subject-specific knowledge and professional development opportunities (Aslam et al., 2018). In addition, given the creativity and exploration involved in this kind of problem solving and creative thinking, it is important that teachers feel they are working in a trusted environment (Gregory 2017; Tschannen-Moran 2013).

To explore what is needed to maximize professional learning around ADST, I will look at the importance of: subject-specific curriculum supports; the importance of leadership, and in this case, servant leadership; and the role of professional development.

Subject-Specific Curriculum Supports

It is difficult to directly connect the redesigned curriculum of ADST to professional learning opportunities as the research in this area is yet to be published. As a result, it leaves us with drawing parallels from STEM, STEAM, and PBL to ADST, making them the closest comparisons in terms of subject discipline areas. Aslam et al. (2018) notes that, "STEM outreach therefore provides an opportunity for teachers to learn how to utilize new pedagogies in their practice and provide students with a broader understanding of new research and information relevant to STEM" (p. 60). Promoting teacher professional learning as being something that needs to be current, content area specific, relevant, and ever evolving to support student learning is a continuous thread among researchers (Aslam et al., 2018; Kenny et al., 2018; Stein et al., 2006; Stevenson et al., 2016; Svendsen, 2017). Besides the characteristics of subject specific teacher professional learning, educators also require autonomy. As MacDonald et al. (2019) point out in their case study of an Australian STEAM curriculum innovation: "If teachers themselves are not permitted to adopt ways of working that embrace curiosity and cultivate pedagogical innovation, their ability to create parallel learning environments for their students is likewise inhibited" (p.70). The need to provide teachers with a variety of opportunities for learning and professional growth is just as vital to success in the classroom as providing differentiated learning to students. MacDonald et al. (2019) also explores the importance of looking at creative ways to deliver cross-curricular professional development and recognizes the importance of having specialist educators in each discipline area to support change. Within the

secondary school context, there are specialist teachers for each subject area. For elementary teachers, this is not the case: having subject based specialization would require knowledge that is beyond most teacher training programs thus the need for external supports and resources when it comes to ADST.

Leadership

A key place of support for teacher professional learning and growth, when there are curriculum changes, comes from the administration. When a district or school leader values professional development and is clear about its importance, teachers themselves are more likely to be involved in improving their practice, taking risks with their learning and growth, and generating buy-in (Gregory 2017; Tschannen-Moran 2013). This puts a teacher-as-learner lens on the culture of a school and builds the relationships amongst adults within a school community. “If being a role model is ever necessary, it’s when it comes to cultivating a culture of trust” (Tschannen-Moran, 2013, p. 44). If the relationships within the school community can be built on trust, caring, and empathy, they align with a servant leadership approach. Robert Greenleaf (1977) coined the term, “servant leadership” and from his writings, a set of characteristics were created that identify the qualities of a servant leader. They include: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Northouse (2019) states that, “servant leaders put followers first, empower them, and help them develop their full personal capacities” (p. 227). Research suggests that professional development is shaped by the context of the school and the priorities of the administration (Stevenson et al., 2016). Therefore, to cultivate curiosity and provide teachers with a safe space to learn, collaboration provides an ideal environment (Gregory 2017; Tschannen-Moran 2013). “Compassion, joy, love – these deep human capacities are

essential components of educational leadership that evoke and sustain teacher commitment to learning" (Cherkowski, 2012, p. 57). The servant leadership style supports the growth of others through a commitment to them and connects to the concept of building learning communities that allow for growth to occur (Greenleaf 1977).

Professional Development

There is a disconnect between which current professional learning opportunities are often available and the kind that research suggests could have a larger impact if given the time and opportunity (Loucks–Horsley et al., 2000; Stevenson, 2016; Fullan et al., 2015; Massell 2000). Loucks-Horsley et al. (2000) and Stevenson et al. (2016) support the connection between long term professional development and teacher growth. They ask for a larger focus on professional development beyond an after-school workshop or a single professional development day: "Courses, workshops, and institutes are rarely coordinated or sustained over time so that teachers get depth and breadth in what they need to know and be able to do" (p. 32). The acknowledgement by district leaders of the need for teachers to continue to up-skill themselves over time when new curricula are introduced would enable teachers to feel like contributions to their pedagogical understanding are valued and supported (Crippen, 2010; Massell, 2000; Stein, 2005; Stevenson, 2016). Research supports the link between a long-term investment in teacher professional learning and the teachers who have participated in that professional learning, sharing it with other groups of teachers (Svendsen, 2017). Long term professional development that is supported by school and district leadership is essential to the growth of school learning communities. Additionally, it is imperative to the overall goal of supporting educators with new or revised curriculum linking back to the area of subject specific curricular supports.

To tie this research together, servant leadership qualities are critical to supporting teachers through professional learning. They provide a connection between a commitment to growth and development, while also taking the time to understand where teachers are at in their learning. However, given the lack of literature surrounding professional learning as it relates to ADST and educators, this is a new and challenging area that needs to be explored to further understand the possibilities.

Methodology

As I began to dig deeply into my inquiry, I narrowed my focus to looking at how servant leadership strategies and characteristics may have facilitated my teaching colleagues' professional learning and growth in relation to ADST. I wanted to understand the relationship between applying servant leadership characteristics and professional learning opportunities in ADST. My epistemology as a curriculum support teacher meant that I came from a solid foundation built on professional relationships with colleagues, leaders, and mentors that pushed me to grow in my own professional practice. Those connections led me to step out from the comfort of established routines, daily sameness, and into experimentation, risk, and tremendous growth. In turn, the push to do something different in an entirely new role resulted in deep reflection on my part as to how I could connect with teachers outside of the walls that being a secondary school metal shop teacher put up. As such, I saw myself as close to my participants. The assumption that teachers were unfamiliar with ADST and struggled with how to implement the new curriculum was my point of access to the topic of ADST support. Ontologically, I needed to find common ground going into these unfamiliar classrooms, through the multiple perspectives and experiences that my colleagues were having. It became clear over time, after working alongside my elementary colleagues, that our experiences did share common themes. I

found that the grounding roots of building relationships and approaching professional learning as a place of building confidence with my colleagues was at the very heart of what I do. These relationships increased demand for my expertise and support throughout the district.

Method

Approaching my research through the paradigm of constructivism allowed me to focus on my participants' voices and their specific experiences. Coming from that place of connection, I wanted to investigate these relationships and the use of servant leadership qualities as a qualitative phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of choosing phenomenology as a research method was to: allow for the rich descriptions of the participants' stories; to clearly articulate the participant voice; and to honour the servant leadership characteristics of committing to growth, serving the greater good, listening, being empathetic, and putting participants as learners first (Northouse, 2019). I was interested in a specific phenomenon (servant leadership) that all of my participants had experienced. What is it about these relationships that had sparked growth in my colleagues? Why did they reach out for support or new ideas? Did they feel empowered in their professional growth? Phenomenology acknowledges that the researcher has bias and therefore it must be acknowledged and bracketed when the data is presented and discussed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure that bias was transparent in all aspects of the data, I bracketed myself as much as possible. I clearly described my connection to the research and any preconceived ideas, assumptions, or notions with regards to the outcomes in my analysis. Specifically, I looked at my assumptions around the impact of servant leadership. I had been positively impacted throughout my career by leaders who led using a servant leadership model and this formed my bias.

Data Sources

After receiving ethics approval from the university (see Appendix A), I chose school district colleagues as the basis for my data collection. I began my research with an emailed Invitation to Participate sent out to school district colleagues that had identified having experienced professional learning through a servant leadership conceptual framework in the area of ADST. Those people who responded positively to participating in my research became my research sampling. This purposeful sampling of five people (see Table I) was asked to participate in recorded interviews that, once concluded, were transcribed, analyzed, and coded for themes. Once participants agreed to participate in the research data collection, an emailed copy of the Consent to Participate was electronically sent to each interviewee. The participants were additionally sent a copy of the Interview Protocol (Appendix B) to allow them time to prepare for the interview if they so wished.

Table 1

Participant Identification and Grade levels

Participant Identification[i]	Grade Level Taught
Participant 1	Intermediate
Participant 2	Primary
Participant 3	Primary
Participant 4	Primary
Participant 5	Primary

[i] All participants were asked for a pseudonym they would like to use, but all preferred to use their interview number.

The interviews were intentionally conducted through online meetings because of the global pandemic surrounding COVID-19. As a district support teacher who traveled throughout the district, and into a variety of school sites at any given time as part of my role in the district, I felt it was important to make sure my participants felt safe during the interview process. In taking these factors into consideration, I elected to conduct the meetings virtually and not in person. This allowed me to ensure appropriate safety measures around physical distancing. I used the Microsoft Teams meeting platform to conduct the interviews, while simultaneously recording them using the Otter transcription service on a secured, personal phone. Microsoft Teams is an online platform used in the school district to conduct meetings, communicate with staff and students, and share documents and files. Otter is an online transcription and recording application that records the audio of a conversation and transcribes conversations as they are occurring. It also allows for a conversation transcription to be exported into a Microsoft Word document. The interview was transcribed from the Otter application and audio checked to ensure accuracy. The transcript was exported from Otter within 24 hours of each completed interview. Once the transcript was exported, it was deleted from the Otter application. The transcribed working interviews were shared through an emailed member check with detailed instructions to the participants to review the transcript carefully and ensure their voice was clearly their own and identified as unaltered. The participants were also asked to make notes regarding any additions, deletions, or changes they wished to have made to their individual transcript. Furthermore, participants were asked to confirm that there were no identifying remarks or comments made within the transcript that needed to be altered or removed. The member check was completed within 14 days of receiving their emailed copy of the transcription. The participants were advised that they could no longer withdraw from the research once their

member check was completed. As the principal investigator, I also kept a reflective journal throughout the research process to make detailed notes regarding my processes, thoughts, and connections. The journal was not shared with participants; however, it provided an outlet for me to notice and name my assumptions throughout the interview process thus providing me with a record of my bias.

Data Analyses

I began my analyses of the data collected by engaging in the "data analysis spiral" as noted in Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 186). As such, the steps I took were as follows:

1. Reading and noting emergent ideas: After the completion of each member check, I read through each transcript multiple times making notes in the margins where I felt the data showed connections that I could use when developing my overall analysis. As Saldana (2016) states, "we recommend memoing during each and every analytic session and often return to the memos written during the early analysis as a way of tracking the evolution of codes and theme development" (p. 188). I found this process very helpful in immersing myself in the data, to fully understand and connect with it. Some of the emerging thoughts aligned with my preconceived ideas for themes as a result of the conceptual framework of servant leadership that I had applied to the research.
2. Describing and classifying codes into themes: The process for my first level of coding fell under the category of "a priori" coding as documented in (Saldana, 2016). The conceptual framework I was working with provided me with the initial codes I was looking for in the data. I chose to colour code for each one, applying a single colour for each servant leadership characteristic: empathy, listening, serving the greater

good, commitment to growth, and follower first. Throughout this process, I also summarized my reflective journal notes while comparing them to the data collected, further noting connections and surprises.

3. Developing and assessing interpretations: My second, first level coding involved emergent descriptive coding that I then used to determine my categories. The categories were aligned to thick descriptions and supported using quotations from the transcript. I highlighted powerful quotes as I progressed through the coding process (see Figure 1). The categories were presented in ascending order from the most prevalent to least after putting all the transcript data together.
4. Representing and visualizing the data: Pulling all the pieces together, I presented my findings using detailed descriptions and accounts of the participants (see Figure 2). I included the data in a graphic to show the categories and supporting quotes.

Figure 1

Data Analysis in Progress

Managing Bias. I used several techniques to manage bias in my research. I included clear definitions of terms relevant to servant leaders. Additionally, I asked participants for their interpretations of those same terms during each interview. There were some limitations within my purposeful sampling, as I only selected participants who had identified having had positive experiences with servant leadership. This was to allow for a focus on the elements that made servant leadership a positive experience for my participants. Additionally, it was a result of the limited number of interviews that could be conducted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To further manage bias, each transcript went through a member check process to confirm that the data were accurate, anonymized, and a clear reflection of each participant's voice.

I kept a reflective journal that included a description of how each interview went: any questions, connections, or surprises that came out of the interviews. As well, I recorded any additional follow-up questions that came out of the participants' responses to the interview protocol. Where surprises occurred, I was careful to document the circumstances that surrounded the notation. Once all checks were completed, and data reviewed by all parties, I reviewed my data analyses again for anything that did not fit within my themes or that was not aligned with my categories.

Strength of study. To be sure that my research was an appropriate representation of the participants, I engaged in documenting the "triple crisis" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) within my study. The "triple crisis" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) looks at whether the research presented is trustworthy, that the participants are represented using their own descriptions, and that the research and results are action-oriented. To ensure that the research was trustworthy, I used direct quotes from the participants to provide evidence of the coding categories. Additionally, I provided the interview protocol as an appendix so that readers could refer to the questions asked

of my research participants. I included a comprehensive description of each participant based on the descriptions provided to me by the individual participants. This involved identifying each participant through their interview number as they preferred, as well as any defining qualities they wished to have included about themselves, without compromising anonymity. I further added all the descriptions and clarifications of terms from participant responses to the interview protocol. The definitions and meanings provided belong to the participants and are not my interpretations. To ensure praxis, the educational impact of my research was as follows. First, as a district curriculum support teacher, I aimed to improve my own leadership skills and professional development practices, specifically by understanding the impact and relationship of applying servant leadership strategies to professional development supports I offered. Second, I was able to share what I had learned with other district leaders and colleagues in the Learning Services department to support their own professional practice with regards to supporting teachers with their professional growth through using a servant leadership lens. Another point of great importance was the opportunity to begin to fill a gap in the research surrounding ADST and servant leadership.

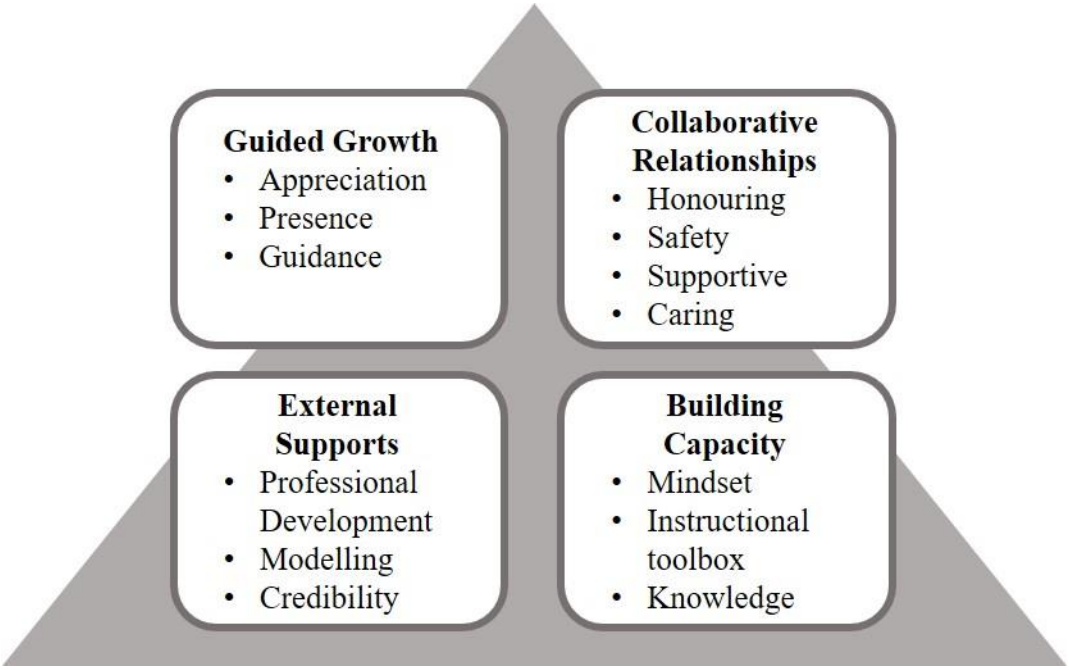
Results

Based on the interview transcript analyses, there were four emergent themes (see Figure 2) central to "teacher professional learning" that were considered and discussed in this section. Within each theme, three to four distinct codes were identified. The themes were as follows: (a) guided growth, (b) collaborative relationships, (c) external supports, and (d) building capacity. Two of the themes, guided growth and collaborative relationships, were discussed as conditions that were needed to help participants feel and explore their experiences and personal

connections. The final two themes, external supports and building capacity, were discussed as structures that enabled teacher professional learning. I discuss each of the themes below.

Figure 2

Themes and Codes



Guided Growth

Guided growth can be described as professional growth for teachers that is supported by an outside agency, colleague, or district personnel. All five participants referred to growth in their professional learning in relation to guidance, presence, and/or appreciation. “Participant 3” spoke often about the benefits of the “guide on the side” and how through this *guidance* they had “all the support I needed; [district personnel] was there when I led for the first time.” It was important for Participant 3 to feel like there was someone close by when they were trying new lessons or activities, and though they may not have needed direct support, it was there if required throughout the activity. Other participants connected to guidance as well, mentioning how they

appreciated having someone come in and do the first lesson, or provide materials and supports "in a way we needed, that worked really well" ("Participant 2").

The idea of *presence* and having a district level support available were key points shared in each interview. "Participant 5" acknowledged that having "supports in new areas like ADST and [district personnel] showing me and guiding me has been so valuable." The presence of someone who could support their learning from within the classroom was a key factor.

For example, in other interviews, "Participant 1" noted the impact of having someone acknowledge and *appreciate* where they were at in their professional learning and how to move to the next level: "Let me show you how you can take the next step to continue your learning." This spoke to the honoring of where teachers were at in their learning, but also the care that was added by providing learning opportunities that were meaningful and specific to the participants' professional learning goals. Participant 2 discussed the importance of "allowing teachers to be in control of their own learning, while allowing the teacher access to expert knowledge." Participant 2 also felt it was important to have professional learning opportunities provided that acknowledged what teachers needed to feel supported in their growth and an appreciation of where they were at in their learning: "Providing professional development that is practical, hands on, and easily implemented." Each participant felt connected to their professional learning growth when it was guided; they were not left alone to figure it all out for themselves. This theme of guided growth was directly connected to the next theme that explored the relationship between mentor and teacher.

Collaborative Relationships

Professional relationships that enabled the participants to not only feel seen and heard, but also feel safe, supported, and cared for were critical to the theme of collaborative

relationships. The idea seemed to be that, to move forward in your professional learning, you needed to have a network of supports in place that provided you with the collaborative elements that made teaching and learning effective and allowed for growth in the educator. The codes within collaborative relationships focused on *honouring, being supportive, safety,* and *caring.* Each of these key components seemed important to participants wanting solid professional relationships.

Honouring was a key element referenced by four out of the five participants. "[District personnel] came in, in the mornings and was part of my circle, three mornings a week. So, she was part of my classroom before she started to work with the kids" (Participant 1). Participant 4 commented that "the leader was understanding of how it feels to be a new teacher." The participants each appreciated the kindness offered by professional development leaders and how each leader wanted to be a part of things in their classrooms instead of just offering a quick fix. They engaged with students and the teacher to get to know them before offering ways to support the learners. "I had a [district personnel] come in and she swooped in and sort of hung out with me before we started, and then she said she was going to observe the students and hang out with them and we would chat afterwards" (Participant 2). Underpinning this professional development was the care and attention provided to each of the participants.

The concept of having *support* available that was non-judgmental and simply there if they needed it was also discussed by all the participants. The support provided seemed tied to relationships that had been built over time with people who could be relied on to provide guidance and care. "Knowing that I had a supportive person that I could rely on and be open with what I was struggling with" was shared by Participant 5. While time was not directly mentioned by any of the participants, the implication that collaborative relationships took time to build

came from how participants did comment repeatedly about working together, collaborating, sharing ideas, tag teaming, ongoing communication, and connecting. This all-required time to make happen: time out of a day to send an email or make a phone call; time to book a meeting or schedule a classroom activity. “I remember her coming and just sitting with me in my office and going through absolutely everything and listening and hearing me talk about my concerns and my worries” (Participant 5). The support that was provided to this participant went above and beyond what they had expected, further backing up the importance of supportive relationships.

Each of the participants referred to *caring* relationships that provided a *safe* place to share and work through things together as being something that left them feeling taken care of: “I have often felt cared for and honored, they really leave you with something for yourself” (Participant 3). When looking at the data, it was apparent to me that collaborative relationships had a positive impact on, and reinforced the importance of, teacher professional learning for the participants. They were all connected to the idea of support and being cared for in their working relationships and, in turn, being able to do the same for others. These collaborative relationships, along with guided growth, supported participants’ professional learning. These relationships and growth built off of key structures: external supports and building capacity.

External Supports

This theme was found throughout the interviews in a variety of examples and seemed to enable participants to grow and develop collaborative relationships. External supports referred to professional learning opportunities and connections as structural supports. The codes extracted from this theme dug deeper into how professional learning was offered and what was needed from a district or larger professional learning provider. The most referenced code was *professional development*. Each of the five participants spoke about the need to access

professional development both in larger group settings, like conferences, as well as in small, more intimate settings such as team time, collaboration groups, and small afterschool learning workshops. Each participant was able to easily list off multiple supports that the district provided to educators and the benefits of having access to things when they needed them: “literacy leads, district helping teachers, collaboration time and conferences” (Participant 4). Participant 1 also referred to professional development options as “accessible materials, workshops, classroom demonstrations.” It was noted that nearly all the participants made mention of professional development that extended past the initial activity. They were drawn to options that not only had topic staying power, but also the ability to continue into a “cycle of learning; you learn, you practice, you learn some more, you reflect” (Participant 3).

Professional development was followed closely by the other two codes in this theme of *modelling* and *credibility*. References to modelling of the new curriculum, projects, or activities were strong throughout all the interview transcripts. The idea of seeing new teaching strategies in action made things that previously seemed out of reach, very attainable. “To see it modeled step by step; the preparation, the classroom management, the instruction, the coaching as the kids were working, the cleanup, everything made it seem possible. Whereas before it seemed impossible” (Participant 3). Additionally, Participant 2 made a very similar observation: “It was just seeing a whole class woodworking project go so smoothly, that was a way that I felt empowered that I could do that.”

Credibility of the professional development leader was also discussed. Participants engaged with professional development leaders that had specialized knowledge, specifically in the field of ADST. They looked for professional development that was offered by people whom they had previous experiences with: leaders of professional development that were “super

friendly, engaging" (Participant 1). Participants also signed up for professional development when it came recommended by others who had been to a session offered by a specific presenter. "([District personnel] told me about that and I went. It was great. I learned lots of stuff" (Participant 2). Each of the codes found within external supports appeared to influence how teachers saw new learning functioning for themselves and in their classrooms. In addition to external supports, participants discussed how a focus on building capacity was also critical to enabling professional learning.

Building Capacity

The final theme shared by participants focused on Building Capacity. Participants were driven to plan and build for future growth within their professional practice. Within building capacity there were three dominant codes: *mindset, instructional toolbox,* and *knowledge.*

When looking at *mindset* it was noted by participants that professional leaders, "having an ongoing learning mindset" (Participant 4) was a powerful connection for them and drew them to connecting with professional learning opportunities that supported a positive learning mindset. Additionally, it was documented that some participants had a perception that there were topics that they perceived as being out of reach to them: "ADST was really far away" (Participant 1). They needed to see themselves become not only competent, but also confident in their knowledge and skills. For some participants this started with shifting their own mindset and moving away from thoughts of "ADST was not my area of expertise" (Participant 5) to a place of "this is an area that requires growth" (Participant 3). This shift in mindset enabled them to pursue learning opportunities that fit their needs and might ultimately build their skills and knowledge. Additionally, whether watching a lesson be modeled for them to enable a change in

mindset or knowing that they could go ahead and be successful teaching something new, were key points noted by the interviewees.

Associated with mindset was the idea of needing to fill their *instructional toolboxes*. Gathering new and inspiring ideas increased their skills in curriculum areas like ADST with "practical, hands-on learning" (Participant 3). Each participant shared that they were looking for activities to connect to areas of the new curriculum that would allow for their students to gain knowledge and skills, but also were looking for how and where they were going to get those projects or "tools in my toolbox" (Participant 1) that would support the new learning required of them. Participant 5 noted that they appreciated and looked for professional development that provided supports and ideas "that I know I can implement in the classroom the next day." The tools that could make teaching new content accessible were key to the participants' engagement.

Though *knowledge* was directly linked to instructional tools, it could also be described as the content knowledge itself. For all of the participants, there was not only a need but a desire as well to gain the knowledge required to teach all the areas of the new curriculum including ADST. There was a thread that ran through each interview about being able to "implement the new curriculum" (Participant 5). Having the tools and the skills to feel good about what they were sharing with their students was important and something that each participant noted. Layered onto the curriculum was the core competency model within the new curriculum that asked teachers to present things to students using "I can" statements. This was a switch for some teachers, to look at their instructional methods and be able to guide their students in applying self-reflective practices, resulting in more new learning for teachers. For each participant there were lots of areas of the new curriculum that they felt they needed to learn more about: literacy and writing strategies, numeracy, and outdoor education, as well as the hands-on learning

components of the ADST curriculum. The aim of increasing their knowledge was to hopefully support their own teaching practice and student learning.

Each of the components of building capacity worked together to support the growth in teachers, giving them the confidence to teach new curricular content areas. With the external supports provided through collaborative relationships and guided growth, participants were able to fill their buckets with new ideas and instructional materials. This gave them the capacity to move forward in a positive and confident way. In some cases, it provided the confidence that some participants felt they needed so that they could share the knowledge they had gained with others in a meaningful way, by taking on new roles in leading curricular change in their school.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge surrounding the question of how servant leadership characteristics impacted teacher professional learning in the area of ADST. Results explored the connections and interactions between not only the themes themselves but the characteristics of empathy, listening, serving the greater good, a commitment to growth, and putting the follower first.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership as described by the participants in this study involved a leader who aimed to serve the greater cause and the people they worked with to build a community. Participants described a leader as someone with the characteristics of being a good listener, being able to build relationships, and having empathy: someone who leads by example and comes alongside others to model and share (Participant 1; Participant 2; Participant 3). These are also aspects critical to servant leadership as defined by Robert Greenleaf (1977) and were apparent in

the themes discussed above. Those characteristics were the common thread that ran between each, tying all the pieces together.

Empathy and Listening

The characteristics of empathy and listening are core components of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and were found within the themes of collaborative relationships and external supports. When looking at the theme of collaborative relationships, most participants noted the feeling of being cared for or when a professional development leader expressed empathy towards them while working with them: “It made me feel like I could do a better job helping those students because someone was taking care of me and making sure I was okay too” (Participant 2). Listening related to this theme as well. Participants commented on professional development leaders who met them where they were at and tailored the presentation materials to meet the needs of the participants’ professional learning and growth.

> They are coming as more of; what are your goals, what are you wanting to get out of this, and how can I help you, so a lot of listening involved in building that relationship between the group of people and the leader in order to have success in the end. (Participant 4)

The nature of the questions asked by the professional development leader enabled participants to articulate their needs for growth. This required leaders to listen and be responsive to the needs of the participants. External support was an interesting theme that, when explored through the lens of servant leadership characteristics, showed how it was both responsive and reflective of the needs of the participant. This may have been the result of the external support providers listening to what was needed in the learning community that they were supporting.

Commitment to Growth

Attached to listening and empathy was a strong commitment to the growth of others. This was referenced in interview data in both the theme of guided growth as well as external supports. When participants discussed their guided growth, it was noted how the professional learning was about them and not the provider. This supported the fundamental approach of a servant leader's commitment to the growth of others (Greenleaf, 1977). Providing learning opportunities for the benefit of others and their learning "made the lessons very accessible for an elementary school classroom" (Participant 1). When the professional development leader met the needs of the people who were attending workshops, or used materials that had been provided by the leader, it was valued. Participants appreciated that materials were accessible and targeted to their growth. This commitment to growth links directly to the research of Tschannen-Moran (2013) and Cherkowski (2012) who both explore the role of leadership in supporting teacher professional learning.

Serving the Greater Good

Moving on from the characteristic of commitment to the growth of others is the notion of serving the greater good in servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). This links again to the external supports that were provided to participants in all scenarios ranging from one-on-one supports to larger professional development opportunities. For each of them the professional development leader was there to support the greater good of educational practice. The participants spoke of the connections and the relationships that they formed and how they felt like they gained benefits; theirs was the bucket that got filled selflessly by the leader. This selflessness connected well to an additional servant leadership quality of putting the follower, in this case the teacher learner, first. Prioritizing the learner and their needs is fundamental to a servant leadership style and

supports the notion that by building others up, we are in turn building ourselves up (Greenleaf, 1977). Moving on from servant leadership strategies, the results also provided insight into targeted professional learning supports in the subject area of ADST.

Supporting Professional Learning in ADST

The critical components that connected professional learning specifically to the subject area of ADST included the modelling of lessons and activities, direct subject knowledge, and confidence in the content area. Multiple participants noted the importance of having an activity modelled for them in their classroom, and how this provided them with the opportunity to observe the techniques and skills necessary to complete a hands-on activity with their students. This connects to the research behind targeted professional learning opportunities discussed by Aslam et al. (2018). Having activities modelled provides teachers with the ability to make connections with content and its delivery to their students. Seeing an activity in action while not having to focus on the instruction of the activity allows for the classroom teacher to be able to see the capabilities of the students.

Though nearly all the current literature focuses on STEM and/or STEAM, it is important to remember and acknowledge that ADST is different and incorporates a wide range of elements. When looking at the content area of ADST, as noted from the BC Ministry of Education curriculum documents (2019), there is a great deal of flexibility in the delivery of the subject. This brand-new curriculum creates an environment that supports specific professional development. The underlying theme of the curriculum focuses on the design cycle and hands-on learning approaches. STEM and STEAM are ways to connect core content areas into something cross-curricular. ADST is a stand alone that provides teachers with a variety of ways to engage in teaching the content, therefore requiring a deeper knowledge of how to make that happen.

Participants in this study referenced being able to go to focused professional development workshops that provided direct instruction on the ADST curriculum with useable activities that were accessible to them as classroom teachers.

> The [district personnel] was super friendly, engaging and made the lessons very accessible for an elementary school classroom, and then to build upon that comes into my classroom and demonstrated what a lesson would like. Then I felt empowered, I had the tools, I had the experience as part of the lesson and the resources to then take things a bunch of different ways. (Participant 1)

By being provided with focused professional learning, participants were able to build their knowledge base and confidence in the subject area. This connection is reinforced in the writings of Fullan et al. (2015) and MacDonald et al. (2019). They support the notion that providing teachers with direct curricular supports is vital to increasing engagement with new subject areas.

The results of the research study strongly imply that approaching new curriculum professional learning through the lens of servant leadership strategies provides a strong foundation for engagement with teachers. Additionally, it highlights the need for specialized curricular content professional development in the area of ADST that is provided by leaders who create an environment that builds teachers up and reinforces their confidence.

Study Limitations and Recommendations

There are at least three potential limitations concerning the results of this study. The first limitation concerns the small participant sample size of five. Not only was this a small sampling, but it was further limited by the fact that each participant had previously identified having positive experiences with servant leadership characteristics. Had this been a random sampling, the research information gathered might have shown differences within their responses.

Interviewing those with positive and negative leadership experiences could be a next step. A second potential limitation was that all of the participants were elementary teachers, and all but one were primary grade teachers. If the research had been conducted with a more even distribution of primary and intermediate educators, or even middle grade teachers, the results might have varied. A final limitation for this research was that it took place during the global COVID -19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in all interviews being conducted using a virtual/online format as the increased stress from having someone extra in their classroom was too much. It also meant that educators were potentially experiencing screen fatigue, and this may have influenced their responses and the length of the conducted interviews.

Implications and Recommendations

Given these limitations, the results of this research study indicated that servant leadership qualities supported teacher professional learning in ADST. The results suggested several theoretical and practical implications. I propose the following implications and questions for further discussion and reflection.

1) How am I going to move forward applying servant leadership characteristics to professional learning opportunities that I provide in my role in the district? What growth would I see in my own professional practice? What could this look like for my colleagues in learning services and curriculum?
2) An investigative study on the impact of long-term professional development supports, with a target on ADST and hands-on learning, could further contribute to the current body of research regarding investment in professional learning that goes beyond the one-off workshop (Loucks-Horsley et al., 2000; Stevenson et al., 2016).

3) Further research with regards to ADST as a specialty curricular area is needed. Broader studies involving educators teaching elementary ADST are necessary to fully understand the importance of providing targeted professional development in non-traditional subject areas (Fullan et al., 2015; Aslam et al., 2018).
4) Approaching professional learning through a servant leadership lens seems to allow for teachers to feel supported and take ownership of their learning. Could more professional learning leaders use a servant leadership framework to build trust and relationships with their participants?

The present study enhanced my understanding of the relationship between servant leadership characteristics and teacher professional learning in ADST. I am hopeful that the current research will stimulate further investigations with a targeted focus on professional learning that is specific to the ADST area of study. In terms of my own professional practice, I intend to continue applying the servant leadership characteristics to the professional learning partnerships that I am a part of. I believe that building relationships with my colleagues is central to their professional growth and my own. Servant leadership works well as a lens to approach professional learning in ADST, as well as an approach to teaching ADST in the classroom with students. A further objective is to share with my colleagues that applying a servant leadership lens to professional learning opportunities may support their participants and provide them with feelings of empowerment and growth in their practice.

When I began this master's program, it was from a stance of wanting to look more deeply at the mentorship side of things and instead, I changed paths and focused on leadership. It is noteworthy, however, that as my participants talked about aspects of servant leadership, they described the mentor within, not separate from the leader. The qualities of a mentor that reside

within a servant leader are listening, providing support, and facilitating vision and growth. As a mentor you are a leader and as leaders, we need to be mentors.

References

Aslam, F., Adefila, A., & Bagiya, Y. (2018). STEM outreach activities: An approach to teachers' professional development. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *44*(1), 58-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2018.1422618

BC Ministry of Education, (2019), https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/

BC Ministry of Education. (2021). (Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies.) https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/adst

Cherkowski, S. (2012). Teacher commitment in sustainable learning communities: A new "ancient" story of educational leadership. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *35*(1), 56-68.

Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th Edition). Sage Publishing.

Crippen, C. (2010). Serve, teach and lead: It's all about relationships. *Insight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, *5*, 27- 36.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 3rd edition (pp. 1-32). Sage Publishing.

Fullan, M., Rincon-Gallardo, S., & Hargreaves, A. (2015). Professional capital as accountability. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *23*(15), 1-22. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v23.1998

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness.* Paulist Press.

Gregory, J. L. (2017). Trust relationships in schools: Supporting or subverting implementation of school wide initiatives. *School Leadership and Management*, *37*(1-2), 141- 161. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2017.1293639

Kenny, J., Hobbs, L., & Whannell, R., (2020). Designing professional development for teachers teaching out -of- field. *Professional Development in Education, 46*(3), 500-515, http://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1613257

Loucks-Horsley, S., & Bybee, R.W. (2000). Advancing technology education: The role of professional development. *The Technology Teacher, 60*, 31-34.

MacDonald, A., Wise, K., Riggall, J., & Brown, N. (2019). Converging discipline perspectives to inform the design and delivery of STEAM teacher professional learning. *Australian Art Education, 40*(1), 67-88.

Massell, D., (2000) The district role in building capacity: Four strategies. *Consortium for Policy Research in Education*, University of Pennsylvania, RB-32, 2-9.

Northouse, P. G. (2019) *Leadership: Theory and practice* (8th Edition). Sage Publishing.

Saldana, J. (2016) *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd Edition). Sage Publishing.

Stein, S.J., Ginns, I.S., & McDonald, C.V. (2006) Teachers learning about technology and technology education: Insights from a professional development experience, *International Journal of Technology and Design Education, 17*, 179-195. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-006-0008-8

Stevenson, M., Hedberg, J.G., O'Sullivan, K., & Howe, C. (2016) Leading learning: The role of school leaders in supporting continuous professional development, *Professional development in Education, 42(*5), 818-835. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2015.1114507

Svendsen, B. (2017) Teacher's experience from collaborative design: Reported impact on professional development, *Education, 138*(2), 115-134.

Tschannen – Moran, M. (2013). Becoming a trustworthy leader. In M. Grogan's (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd Edition., p. 40- 52): Jossey-Bass.

Appendix A

Ethics Approval

Research, Engagement, & Graduate Studies
33844 King Rd
Abbotsford BC V2S
7M8

Tel: (604) 557-4011
Research.Ethics@ufv.ca
Website: www.ufv.ca/research-ethics

Human Research Ethics Board - Certificate of Ethical Approval

HREB Protocol No: 100547
Principal Investigator: Mrs. Heather Elliott
Team Members: Mrs. Heather Elliott (Principal Investigator)
Dr. Sheryl MacMath (Supervisor)

Title: Servant leadership and teacher professional learning.
Department: Faculty of Professional Studies\Teacher Education

Effective: December 17, 2020
Expiry: December 16, 2021

The Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) has reviewed and approved the ethics of the above research. The HREB is constituted and operated in accordance with the requirements of the UFV Policy on Human Research Ethics and the current Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2).

The approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Approval is for one year. A Request for Renewal must be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
3. Modifications to the approved research must be submitted as an Amendment to be reviewed and approved by the HREB before the changes can be implemented. If the changes are substantial, a new request for approval must be sought. *****An exception can be made where the change is necessary to eliminate an immediate risk to participant(s) (TPCS2 Article 6.15). Such changes may be implemented but must be reported to the HREB within 5 business days.
4. If an adverse incident occurs, an Adverse Incident Event form must be completed and submitted.
5. During the project period, the HREB must be notified of any issues that may have ethical implications.
***NEW** 6. A Final Report Event Form must be submitted to the HREB when the research is complete or terminated.

**Please submit your Research Continuity Plan to REGS@ufv.ca before beginning your research. The plan can be found here: https://www.ufv.ca/research/

Thank you, and all the best with your research.
UFV Human Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: In what ways do servant leadership strategies facilitate teacher professional learning?

Preamble: Thank you for participating in this research. I appreciate your willingness to provide your insights with regards to servant leadership and how it may facilitate teacher professional learning. I would also like to remind you that at any time during the interview process you may withdraw your participation as per the informed consent document.

1. I would like to begin by first asking you what you think of when I say Servant Leadership?
    i. Can you give me an example…?
    ii. Could you describe …

2. What does teacher professional learning mean to you?
    i. Curious why you said…
    ii. Could you tell me more about…?

3. Can you describe a time when you felt a professional development leader demonstrated empathy?
    i. How did that make you feel?

4. Describe a time when a professional development presenter/leader made you feel empowered in your learning.
    i. Empowered how…?
    ii. Was it a change in practice or…?

5. What draws you to engage in teacher professional learning?
    i. Can you tell me more about…?
    ii. Could you describe…?
    iii.

Closure: Thank you again for participating. How would you like to be described in my research? Is there a specific pseudonym that you would like me to use? Once the recordings have been transcribed, I will be in touch, to ask for you to review your responses to ensure I have captured them accurately. Upon the return of the transcript after your review, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the research process.