Creating Our Future

By: Karen Steffensen

As Human Beings, we are defined by the causes we serve and the problems we struggle to surmount. Whether it's Nelson Mandela battling the scourge of apartheid, Craig Venter unraveling the human genome, or Larry Page and Sergey Brin bringing order to the vastness of cyberspace, it is a passion for solving extraordinary problems that creates the potential for extraordinary accomplishment…You're going to need passion for some very specific, very noble challenge. " (*The Future of Management*, Gary Hamel, 2007, p. 37)

It was mid September 1990 and in my newly appointed role as Vice Principal at Sechelt Elementary I was keen to put into practice suggestions I had encountered in the numerous leadership readings I had been doing, in particular, one that made reference to "managing by walking around". As I wandered the hallways of the main floor, I soon came across a group of boys outside their respective classrooms, engrossed in a game of eraser hockey, oblivious to my presence and keen on scoring their next goal. Curious as to why they were not in class and wondering what they were supposed to be doing, I asked them what class they were missing. They stared up at me with big brown eyes and sheepish grins and muttered a single utterance- "French". We continued in dialogue about why they had been asked to leave class and what their teacher had asked them to do while outside the classroom.

It quickly became clear from their responses that they did not have positive feelings or connections to learning French and preferred to misbehave in order to get kicked out of class so they might continue with their eraser hockey challenge. I indicated that if they were unable to participate in French with their teacher, they would, instead, have to learn French in the office with me. I asked them to pick up their belongings and follow me. As we entered my office I could sense their frustration, surprise and bewilderment.

"You're going to teach us French?" one of them asked in disbelief.

"Yes, I am. French is one of the subjects you are expected to learn, so if you aren't able to stay in class and learn it with your regular teacher, then you'll learn French with me instead."

"Can't you just give us a detention or lines instead?"

"No, gentlemen, that is not an option." There was silence as they stared at me in disbelief. We began reviewing numbers, colors and simple phrases. The boys repeated the words and phrases in chorus and we eventually moved on to writing some of the concepts we had been reviewing orally. Half an hour had gone by when one of the boys muttered, "This is hard work."

"Can you tell me what makes this hard work for you?"

"In our regular class we can just sit there and we don't have to participate. With you, we *have* to join in. I'd rather be in my French class, "

"Why do we have to learn French, anyway?" another boy challenged with anger and frustration in his voice.

"If you could wave a magic wand and change the way things are in school, what would you rather be learning?"

"Why can't we learn our own language?"

I paused for a moment and asked, "What language would that be?"

"she shashishlhem."

"Is that the name for the Sechelt Language?" (Twenty-five percent of the school's population was made up of students with First Nations ancestry. The boys who were with me in the office were from the Sechelt Nation).

"Yes, " one boy proudly responded. "That is *our* language, not French!"

"Are you saying that you'd like to be able to learn Sechelt language here at school--instead of French?" I paused, and then continued, "How would you feel if I explored the possibility for the Sechelt language to be taught here at school?" (Currently, the only way students learned their language was in the pre-school language nests that took place on the Sechelt band lands).

"You'd do that?"

"Yes. It is important to me that you are interested in your learning. I will take the time to find out if this is possible for you, but I need you to make a commitment to me. I will find out what it will take for the Sechelt language to be offered as a choice for you here at the school, but in the meantime, I need you to not get kicked out of French class. Can you agree to this?"

The boys looked at one another and nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we can."

"I will begin by talking to the chief and council about the idea. I hope to have an answer for you by the end of the week." We shook hands and I lead the boys back to class.

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It was an extraordinary problem that created potential for extraordinary accomplishment (Hamel, 2007). For the students in our school, twenty –five percent of whom were from the Sechelt Nation, this opportunity not only meant they could learn their language of choice, it also had the potential to be part of the Sechelt Nation's quest to sustain the Sechelt language for future generations, a language that was in jeopardy of vanishing along with the last of the elders.

Within a month after the meeting with the boys, elders from the Sechelt Band were coming into the school to teach she shashishlhem language and cultural classes for the students from the Sechelt Nation. Within a year, we had structured the schedule so that weekly Sechelt language classes for primary students were taking place within the school and the following year we extended the program to the junior/intermediate students and as well to the neighboring secondary school. The next year, as Principal of Sechelt Elementary, I began working with representatives from the Sechelt Nation and contacts from the Ministry of Education, investigating the accreditation process for the Sechelt language to be recognized as second language credit for university entrance into the Arts programs. We were working together to create a new future for the children from the Sechelt Nation in their desire to retain their language and culture. If the accreditation of the language were able to take place, students from the Sechelt Nation would have a new pathway to university, which historically had been blocked by lack of participation in French in the upper years of the secondary school program.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) provides insight into the power of voice and how an empowerment model of participation enhances people's belief in their ability to change their own lives. As Principal, my desire was to transform the culture of the school from one where students from the Sechelt Nation seemed disconnected and disenfranchised from the teaching and learning to one where they felt honored and connected to their past traditions and empowered in their ability to seek new pathways for their future. Through the dialogue that began the day the boys were excluded from French class, I had an opportunity to hear to what degree they were feeling disenfranchised, not only in their learning of French, but also how deeply they were feeling "oppressed". Their culture was not fully recognized within the current structures of the school, district or province. In addition, many of the students from the Sechelt Nation were struggling for positive recognition in this place we called school.

What made the transformation even more challenging was the fact that Sechelt Elementary was a school made up of 4 cultures simultaneously competing for recognition and resources- French Immersion, Program Cadre, English and the Sechelt Nation. Guided by the concept of empowerment (Freire, 1970) and the Mission/Vision statement *Creating Our Future* from the Sunshine Coast School District, as well as the school's mission statement *Learning Together to Build a Better World*, I was compelled to move forward with students, staff and community to unfold within our school walls, a culture that embraced identity for all members. I was determined to work together to create a place where every individual's role was valued as an essential contribution in defining priorities and developing resources. It became the moral imperative that would guide our school governance structures, policies and interactions as we worked together to create our future.

Over the next two years as we embarked on this new pathway, the Sunshine Coast School District underwent a major transformation under the leadership of the Superintendent, moving from a centrally based form of governance to site-based management. It was during this time period that significant changes were able to take place at the school level, which I suggest contributed substantially to the successful

transformation of the school culture. As an administrator I was now empowered by a school system that relied less on hierarchy and more on community. The new structure of governance meant that we were able to shape our direction in more authentic, generative ways; we could respond to the needs of more members of our community; we were able to initiate, create and work collectively in an entrepreneurial spirit with all members of our community. The language structure in the school district's vision statement *Creating Our Future* permitted us to have a voice and to be responsive and innovative with regards to the students in our schools, staff and community.

The mission statement begins with the verb *"Creating"* and suggests to me the need for responsiveness and innovation in the way we approached working together in our school. The following Encarta dictionary definitions of the word "Creating" provides further support to this notion of innovation: *[14th century. < Latin creat-, past participle of creare "bring forth"]*, 1. *make something; transitive verb to bring something into existence*; 2. *give rise to something: transitive verb to result in something or make something happen*; 3. *produce inventions or art: transitive and intransitive verb to use imagination to invent things or produce works of art*; 4. *appoint somebody: transitive verb to give somebody a new title, role or office*.

The second word in the mission statement *"Our"* promotes the idea of a shared collective and understanding that the actions members of the community partake in are meant to be mutually beneficial to one another. The ending word *"Future"* denotes opportunity, things that are not yet determined and have the potential to unfold. Action arising from the Sunshine Coast School District's mission statement is an example of *The Constructionist Principle* (Cooperrider, Sorensen et al. 2000, p. 17)**.**

The Constructionist Principle is an extension of Ken Gergen's work (Gergen 1985; 1994) and also reflective of themes from Giddens (1984) and Weick (1969). The constructionist principle "invites us to find ways to increase the generative capacity of knowledge" (Cooperrider and Whitney 2000, p. 18) and operationalizes the constructionist view in which individuals co-create their reality through language, beliefs

and behavior in real time.

INNOVATION AND TRANSFORMATION VERSUS REFORM

Reform has failed because teachers are not good at sharing power with students, Principals are not good at sharing power with teachers, and school systems are not good at sharing power with their schools. Power is a major problem at every level…the culture of the district impacts on and helps shape the culture of its schools. If school systems are to create total teachers and total schools, they need to grasp the realities of empowerment, not just the rhetoric… disempowered principals create disempowered staffs. Positive interaction needs empowerment. Empowerment means taking more risks and relinquishing tight control. (What's Worth Fighting For, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves p.98-101)

School governance utilizing a business model made popular in the work of John Carver (2000), is based on a Policy Governance model that assigns the school district Superintendent or director of education a role parallel to that of the corporate CEO. In *"Remaking Governance"* (March 2000) Carver suggests the role of the school board is "to govern the system, rather than run it" (p. 26—30). He claims that school boards have traditionally micromanaged the educational process, something that would spell doom for any manager in a business setting. A radical redesign of the function of school boards, Carver explains, would include (1) a focus on educational results rather than on the methods by which they were achieved, (2) newly defined relationships with the general public and parents, and (3) a commitment on the part of the board to speak with one voice rather than as a group of individuals with individual agendas. Changing or improving the relationship between the superintendent and school board overarches almost all proposals for different governance structures. With the new mandate in the Sunshine Coast for site-based management using the Carver Model, we gathered as Principals to discuss and understand the implications this would have for us in our schools. The Superintendent informed us that each school would be provided with an annual budget figure and that it was left to us to determine in collaboration with staff, community and students how best to utilize the funding. The only constraint placed upon us was that all existing collective

labor agreements that existed with support staff unions and the teacher's federation had to be upheld. Previously, as Principals we were given an annual budget that had predetermined spending allocations and staffing allocations, decided upon by central office staff. In the former model, we were not at liberty to modify or change any of these allocations, even if they did not make sense to the existing needs of our school community. In the new model of governance, the specific allocations and decisions were now made at the school level, drafted and submitted to the Secretary Treasurer and Assistant Superintendent for final approval.

This model of governance enabled me to identify, in collaboration with our staff and community, important priorities and directions within the school and to allocate appropriate funds to support those key initiatives and decisions. By analyzing our current standard of practice, spending time to identify gaps in our ability to successfully empower staff and students and problematise those gaps, we realized that we could not continue to operate in a mode of "business as usual". One change we made to "how we did business", stemmed from our realization that the money that was traditionally allocated to the role of a fulltime Vice Principal was better put towards services that would directly support students who were experiencing difficulty socially, emotionally and academically. In re-allocating funding for that one role, we were able to create a program that addressed anger management issues for students, which included daily access to a counselor and support staff; we allocated time for a teacher to provide reading/language support to grades 4- 7 students for a portion of the day which normally would fall under the Special Education teacher's already extremely full schedule; we created a Literacy support teacher who worked with staff one afternoon each day on reading and writing initiatives in the school; and we were able to allocate a staff member time to work with the elders from the Sechelt Nation in our Sechelt Language classes. While this is only one example of resource/funding re-allocation and our ability to evolve new roles based on need versus status quo or tradition, there were many more opportunities created as a result of the site-based governance model. These significant changes to our school would not have been possible in the previous model of central

governance. They were actualized because of our ability to dismantle the traditional norms of how schools "ought to be" structured.

Hybridity, as suggested by Homi Bhabha's in *Location of Culture* (1994) states "the hybrid moment of political change- the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation or translation of elements that are neither the something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both" (p. 28). Bhabha continues to describe the "Third space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot "in itself" be conscious. It is the intervention of the Third space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and references an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open expanding code. By exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (p 39). Our Western compulsion to colonize relies on stability of borders and means that one binary is allowed to unthinkingly dominate the second. Once binaries are destabilized, Bhabha argues that cultures can be understood to interact, transgress, and transform each other in a much more complex manner than the traditional binary oppositions can allow. According to Bhabha (1994), hybridity and "linguistic multivocality have the potential to intervene and dislocate the process of colonization through the reinterpretation of political discourse". It is my contention that site-based management allows us to destabilize the binaries that exist within schools and school systems, binaries that lock us into set roles and patterns of interaction, effectively colonizing one another. Through destabilization of the binaries, new voices can be heard within organizations and individuals are empowered.

The phenomenon of fractals reinforces the notion of innovation. Fractals are beautiful geometric shapes that emerge when non-linear equations are looped back on themselves. When we understand fractals, we understand how they can become a metaphor for the journey of organizational, institutional and educational transformation. I argue that change best occurs through a site-based governance structure founded on the theoretical constructs found in Paulo Freire's empowerment model, Homi Bhabha's

Third Space, and creativity and innovation. By adopting these beliefs as our roadmap for our journey, the outcome will be in an educational system that is generative, responsive, and free of borders and limitations, therefore optimizing the identity of individuals and the entire organization. The intersection of this form of governance structure and mission/vision will ultimately enable us to move us from a state of entropy to renewal and innovation in praxis.

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