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*Ontario Leaders Collaborating for Student Achievement, Equity and Well-being
La collaboration des leaders en Ontario assure la réussite, l'équité et le bien-être des élèves.*

Unleashing the Learning at Pelmo Park Public School Ainsworth Morgan

Pelmo Park Public School, in the north end of Toronto, faced an uncertain future – that was reflected in the school's morale and academic performance. This was until Ainsworth Morgan took over as principal in the fall of 2016. With a vision of hope and success, he turned Pelmo into a place of academic achievement and pride. The story illustrates how Ainsworth enacted the practices of the [Ontario Leadership Framework \(OLF\)](#) and drew on his Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) to ensure student learning, engagement, equity and well-being.

Background

Pelmo Park Elementary School is a K-5 school with 98% of its approximately 300 students travelling to school by bus. Prior to my arrival, there were 15 principals over a three-year period and numerous staff on medical leaves. There are over 20 languages spoken, over 75% of parents were born outside of Canada, and over 90% of Pelmo's students identify as racialized.

Context upon Arrival at the School

As the incoming principal, it became apparent to me that Pelmo was a school that was in a great need. This was due to a confluence of factors that included significant leadership and staff turnover over a number of years and the challenges of engaging parents who do not live in the school community. What was most evident was a neglected physical building, a lack of educational resources especially technology. It was a school lacking the facilities that the majority of elementary schools enjoy – more specifically, a playground which had not been open to students for the previous decade.

Baseline Data

It was not surprising that the negative impact of these conditions on well-being and collective efficacy, not to mention, academic performance, was staggering. Pelmo Park was a school whose culture lacked identity and a clear vision. The school staff were stretched thin to the point of feeling detached and demoralized, while the students were not motivated to achieve academically or to be hopeful for their futures. In 2018, EQAO scores were 35% in reading, 23% in writing, and 14% in mathematics. Clearly, there would be challenges ahead in leading staff, students and parents on a journey to improved engagement, well-being and student achievement.

Social Personal
Leadership Resources
(PLRs) – Perceiving
Emotions, Managing
Emotions, and Acting
in Emotionally
Appropriate Ways

In 2016, Ontario implemented the Renewed Mathematics Strategy (RMS) initiative in an effort to improve student achievement in Mathematics. Given Pelmo Park's low EQAO scores, it

became an RMS school which meant that it was provided with additional staffing and professional development.

Establishing Priorities

I believed that the path to improved academic performance depended on addressing the teaching and learning environment in the school. This meant focussing on creating a safe and engaging space for learning inside and outside the school. There was limited access to before and after school programming because the school is not within walking distance of the vast majority – so finding ways for students to feel ownership of the space while they are in the school and in their classes was essential.

1.2 Identifying specific, shared, short-term goals

Building a new playground to replace the one which was removed a number of years ago, and, for whatever reason was not replaced. This stood out for me as key to showing students and parents that improvements at Pelmo were on the horizon, meaning that their academic and social/emotional needs would be prioritized. It took several years but with support from the Board, the superintendent, the trustee and obviously the parent community who were incredible advocates for their children, the new playground became a reality. It demonstrated that the school experience encompasses what is done both inside and outside of the school.

3.5 Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment

3.3 Building productive relationships with families and communities

It was also important to secure funding to create after-school extracurricular options for students including a range of clubs such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), dance, visual arts, and cooking. In addition to these programs we were able to offer yoga classes for parents and staff.

Part of my vision was to make Pelmo Park a place where students can see themselves, their individual identities, and their value from the moment they enter the building. Pelmo Proud, which became Pelmo's motto, emerged from our conversations. What does Pelmo proud look like, what does it feel like, and what does it sound like? Pelmo students needed to know that they are valued, their progress and their successes are celebrated, and that we're here to support them. That's what Pelmo Proud means to us.

First Leadership Moves

Equity is at the heart of my leadership and it was important that equity was central to the vision we had for the school. This equity stance was a moral imperative in addressing student, staff and parent well-being and establishing what type of environment we want to set for teaching and learning. Equity work has been in place from day one of my becoming Pelmo's principal.

1.1 Building a shared vision

I believed that once a sense of self, belonging and ownership were established among our students – as well as staff and parents – we would be ready to take on what needed to be done to improve student achievement.

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

A Collaborative Supportive Team

To realize my vision for Pelmo and to make it actionable, I needed the support of all relevant stakeholders – students, staff and parents. Also important to me, as the new principal of Pelmo, was the support of my superintendent with whom I shared my observations and recommendations about Pelmo. She, in turn, responded with her time and to the extent possible, with resources including funds to support staff professional development.

This is where the journey began. It involved doing a lot of listening and exchanging ideas to determine what was important to each of the key stakeholders so that we could find common ground. Our parent/caregiver community became engaged and became the driving force supporting Pelmo. Out of this the shared vision of Pelmo Proud emerged. With all stakeholders at the table, we drafted an action plan.

Focusing on Equity, Well-being and Student Performance

It was a five-year vision in which each move built on and strengthened the previous moves all aimed at building a supportive teaching and learning environment.

The pathway to improvement initially focused strongly on equity and well-being as the foundation base to improved student performance.

- Year 1 (2016): Laying the foundation and establishing resources to meet students needs and building a culture of trust;
- Year 2 (2017): Focusing on well-being, identity and Math: “What happens to student engagement when we support student wellness by using the well-being framework to plan for mathematics instruction to foster a positive mindset towards mathematics?” ([TEAMS: Pelmo Park- Unleashing the Learning](#));
- Year 3 (2018): Focusing on equity through culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (CRRP) and a Black student success initiative, “Validate and Then Educate.” “What happens when educators engage in conversations about their privilege and social identities to improve teaching practice to empower Black students?” https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jjUhssKheknrc0_9-ggHAMPnonkp37C/view
- Year 4 (2019): Focusing on achievement “Excellence without Excuses” building on and strengthening successes of the previous three years especially in the area of student self-efficacy.

This was a team effort in which there were many leaders and processes including professional learning community sessions (PLCs) and student and parent focus groups. It meant reaching out to the wider community to establish partnerships with the Ministry and with colleges and universities. We drew on board supports and provided Math, literacy and early years coaches. Pelmo was provided a Math Coach, an Early Years Coach along with a Literacy

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

3.6 Allocating resources in support of the school’s vision and goals

1.4 Communicating the vision and goals

1.3 Creating high performance expectations

2.4 Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students and parents

4.2 Providing instructional support

2.2 Stimulating growth in the professional capacities of staff

5.1 Building staff members’ sense of internal accountability

3.2 Structuring the organization to facilitate collaboration

3.1 Building collaborative cultures and distributing leadership

Coach compliments of the TDS, while the Ministry provided us with the support of a Student Achievement Officer.

Integrating Pelmo's Black Student Success and Excellence (BSSE)

A year ago, we focused more explicitly on elevating academic excellence among our Black students at Pelmo. It's important for me to note that this type of work was not new at Pelmo given the equity work we were already doing. What the BSSE initiative did is validate and further reinforce the expectations I held for staff, students and parents. Given that 90% of our student population is racialized and of this group 60% identify as Black, it was clear that we needed to focus more intentionally on how we are supporting their well-being and success.

2.1 Providing support and demonstrating consideration for individual staff members

Our starting point was to develop a shared understanding of Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP) and what I term "Equity 101." What does Equity 101 mean in the context of Pelmo? It means developing a common language, in terms of the understanding of equity, and the historical significance along with the terminology used as they relate to marginalized students.

4.2 Providing instructional support

The basic premise of this work was that students have to see themselves reflected in this space we call Pelmo. How we contribute to that matters; e.g. are we promoting negative stereotypes or are we promoting positive representations? Do our Black students see themselves reflected in this space? Do they see themselves in positions of leadership and power? Do they see themselves as having opportunities? Do they see themselves being challenged? Do they see themselves being held accountable? Do they also see themselves being encouraged and celebrated so they know that Pelmo is a place where they belong?

2.3 Modelling the school's values and practices

Some Hurdles

Almost five years later and seeing how far we have come makes it easy to forget some of the hurdles that I confronted along the way. Probably the most challenging of all was the need to acknowledge my own biases particularly in times when I had declared my non-negotiables. Among these was holding myself back from imposing unrealistic timelines – I wanted things done yesterday.

Cognitive Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs): problem-solving expertise, knowledge of effective school and classroom practices that directly affect student learning, & systems thinking

My understanding about equity was embedded in my own experiences surrounding anti-Black racism, power and privilege, and anti-oppression. My biases were rooted in the assumptions I made about equity. I expected that we all had a shared understanding of what equity means in an educational context. I was surprised by the lack of urgency and collective understanding about the importance of this work.

Assessing Impact to Date

In terms of academic performances as measured by EQAO test results there have been noteworthy improvements:

- Grade 3 scores in Reading increased from 35% in 2018 to 68% in 2019
- Grade 3 scores in Writing increased from 23% in 2018 to 65% in 2019, and
- Grade 3 scores in Math rose from 14% in 2018 to 51% in 2019.

4.3 Monitoring student learning and school improvement progress

I attribute these improvements to an intentional focus that included setting high expectations, increased staff collaboration and parent involvement and strengthened student voice. This focus aligned the goals of our School Improvement Plan (SIP) with our actions related to equity and anti-oppression.

Other gains included:

- Increase in distributed leadership evident in staff assuming responsibilities to engage with students and families beyond their classrooms, e.g. leading clubs, school teams, Positions of Responsibility (POR);
- A more welcoming and unified school climate evident in climate surveys, greater participation of parents/caregivers in school activities; e.g. School Council, Fun Fairs, parent/caregiver teacher dialogue;
- Dramatic decrease in student suspensions according to suspension data over a 5-year period;
- Decrease in student and staff absenteeism as evident by reduced student and staff sick days;
- Increase in staff, student, family pride in the school as evident by whole school participation in school-based activities and desire to purchase school merchandise;
- Increase in staff engagement and collaboration with both colleagues and students evident in teacher and student reports; and
- Improved collective problem-solving – teacher reports for example, “we aren’t feeling stuck”; teachers feeling supported in their ability to problem solve.

Reflections: The Impact of This Journey on My Leadership Practice

I was an immigrant to this country, and I remember my experience. I was very fortunate to be in an elementary school where I had a strong sense of identity and belonging. I was celebrated for who I was and so it is only natural to pay it forward. Now, as a school leader, I want every student who comes to this space to feel welcomed, to feel valued and not have to hide their identity. I want them to feel that it’s okay to be who they are in the world. I have strengthened my resolve

about being a leader who consistently shows, in his words and actions, that students come first by prioritizing their social and emotional well being.

Psychological
Personal Leadership
Resources (PLRs) –
resilience, optimism,
self-efficacy,
proactivity

In terms of my leadership practice, I have a thick skin which means being comfortable with not being liked. I continue to be willing to take risks even when the work is messy. I need to be comfortable in that discomfort. As a Black male, I continue to face the challenge of convincing others that my skill set goes beyond my skin colour. I sometimes feel that my

capacity and expertise as an instructional leader is overlooked and diminished because my successes seem to be achieved *in spite* of my abilities; however, my failures are clearly highlighted as having happened *because* of me. And for this reason, I suggest caution: when looking at who you want to be in the role of school leader, particularly in marginalized communities, be diligent in going beyond skin colour and develop the capacity to identify content, complexity and ability.

As a leader, I am always balancing equity and academic excellence and do not see them in isolation. They should be synonymous. Representation absolutely matters. However, it is also vital that in the search for representation, strong instructional practice and the courage to lead be critical factors in the selection process.

Some Testimonials – Students, Staff and Parents

Recently – 2019, the entire school community – students, staff and families – found a way to show Mr. Morgan how much they appreciate him. Listen to some staff members – head caretaker, grade three teacher, students, and parents give their perspectives on how he puts distributed leadership into practice Source: Our Toronto (CBC, November 23, 2019) <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1647630915722> November 23

- Head Caretaker: Morgan doesn't take credit for the playground or any of the school's successes. Instead he chooses to empower through teamwork and community. He delegates – leads by example and helps do the work himself.
- Grade 3 Teacher: He doesn't come from a place of ego – he takes risks – everything he does is to benefit the students first of all and then of course the families and the teachers he works with. He's a very humble person and he doesn't like to be in the spotlight.
- Students: He has allowed us to see the diversity in the school. He's amazing – everyone loves him. He taught us many things like self-identity – whether you have a different religion, or you have a different skin colour than other people, at Pelmo it doesn't matter because we're all family.
- Parents: The kids are happier. I see so many faces that are welcoming. It's like teamwork – we're not separate – teacher, parent, student – we're together.