Work-life balance: The working mother’s struggle to balance home life and professional life after maternity leave

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of Alberta, 2006

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

This project examines the struggle of finding work-life balance, specifically for mothers returning to work after maternity leave. This project was driven by the following questions: (1) What is work-life balance? (2) What are the demands and challenges for mothers returning to work after children? (3) How can working mothers be supported to ensure a more successful transition? Finding work-life balance is not a simple task and through my research I have come to believe that for mothers to feel successful in the transition to working mothers they need to be well informed, aware of all of the possible return to work options, and have a strong support network in place. In this project I suggest that a return-to-work package be created the teachers in my district. The use of a survey and small group interviews will acquire the necessary data to determine the information needed in the package. Through this research I hope to bring awareness to the issues surrounding work-life balance for working mothers. It is intended to support mothers in their transition back to work after maternity leave.
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Introduction

The role of mothers has evolved over time in many cultures. Mothers were typically responsible for taking care of the home and their children while the men were responsible for financially supporting the family. However, during World War II the cultural climate was such that men were increasingly needed for combat abroad, while the women stepped into do the technical jobs left unattended as a result. Such as radio operators or factory jobs making uniforms, weapons and ammunition (State Library of Victoria; The National WWII Museum). Since, World War II, women did not simply return home, and their role in the workforce has increased greatly; in the United States for example the female work place participation rate in 1950 was at 34%, which grew to 60% by 2000 (Toossi, 2002). In Canada in 2009, the employment rate of women with children under 16 years of age who were living at home was 72.9% (Statistics Canada, 2013). Despite this increased presence of women in the workforce, many people still believe that mothers should be at home raising their children (Cohn & Caumont, 2014). In this paper I examine the struggles that working mothers face with finding work-life balance and with managing the feelings of guilt that often accompany a return to work.

My motivation and personal context

My motivation for delving into motherhood and the changes working mothers face is my own experience transitioning from childless worker to mother to working mother.
When I first began the journey of completing my Master of Education degree in the summer of 2013, I was 32 weeks pregnant with my first child. My son Lincoln was born five weeks after I had completed my first two courses. When I began the fall 2013 semester, my son was 16 days old and I was sleep-deprived and hormonal. While trying to continue with my studies in fall and winter courses, I was on maternity leave and learning how to be a mother. I was also learning how to prioritize and become motivated enough to tear myself away from my son and complete my assignments. Whether my son was a needy baby or I was (or still am) an overbearing mom, it was not easy to accomplish much around the house, let alone get in the mindset needed for academic pursuits. I share this paper and my ultimate success with my husband as well as my parents, who made the hour-and-a-half drive from Red Deer to Edmonton on a regular basis so that I could complete some work. There were also many nights that my mother stayed with us to help with nighttime feedings or to help console a sick baby. Thanks to this, I managed to survive my first year of motherhood and the first year of my Master’s program.

Transitions: childcare

When the fall courses began again in 2014, it was not only time to decide on my Master’s project but it was time for me to return to work. Of course I thought about staying home to raise my son but, like many other families, we could not financially live on my husband’s salary alone. We therefore made plans for my return to work.
Finding someone to care for your child is no easy task. In my case, neither my husband’s parents nor mine are retired or live in Edmonton so we needed to look outside our families for support. My husband and I decided that it would work better for our situation if we found childcare closer to our home in west Edmonton because I work in Edmonton’s north end and he works downtown. As a result, I joined a Facebook page dedicated to daycares and day homes close to our home and contacted friends and colleagues who lived in and around our neighborhood. To make sure our son had the best, affordable care in our absence we researched both daycares and day homes. We quickly learned that day homes were significantly more affordable than daycare; however daycares do not close if one of the workers is ill, as day homes often do. We weighed the benefits and drawbacks and decided to try to find a day home. I called several day homes recommended by friends or, in some cases friends of friends. They often already had the maximum of two children under two and would give me the number of a friend to contact.

In the end, this lack of success turned out to be a fortunate occurrence, because through these searches we connected with a family that was also looking for childcare. I met Jessica through the University of Victoria graduate program. She was pregnant with her second child as I was pregnant with Lincoln. Her first child having medical needs made it even more difficult for them to find childcare, so she had wanted to hire a nanny and find a third child to help supplement the caregiver’s cost. Since Jessica and her husband lived so close and were people we knew already, the decision was easy. When the nanny did not work out, Jessica’s husband Trevor
decided to quit work and run a day home, and our son Lincoln has been at Daddy Dayhome since my return to work in September.

**Transitions: career**

I was worried about returning to work. There had been many staff changes and new programming implemented in the year I was away. My two closest colleagues were gone: one retired and the other was just leaving for her maternity leave as I returned. I worried that the staff had forgotten that I had once been an important part of the team. I also worried that I wouldn’t be able to return in the same capacity. I had always been the go-getter— the one who never said no. I was on several committees, ran most of the sports and intramural teams, organized the Grade Six student initiatives like recycling and classroom monitoring and ran the announcement program. Coming back I realized that they had managed just fine without me for a year and wondered if my contributions had been as important as I thought they were. But I also wondered if there would be expectations for me to return to all the tasks I had formerly managed. I hate disappointing people and I would hate to have my colleagues think that I was slacking or insufficiently contributing.

I am fortunate enough that I have taught my whole career at the same school and have some excellent friends and colleagues to lean on for support; they have made my transition back to work much easier. Although I may not be living up to my own expectations, I realized that I needed to reevaluate my capabilities and scale back my extracurricular commitments.
Finding my project

Finding the topic for my Master’s project was not easy. What was I passionate about? What did I want to spend a year of my life studying? What kind of changes did I want to make in my field? What was I presently living? Well I was living the guilt - the guilt felt by most mothers as they returns to work having had to leave their children in the care of others, and the guilt felt by working mothers who do not feel like they can be as dedicated to their careers as they were in the past. I sat down with Todd Milford, my Master’s supervisor, in a quandary, not knowing how I wanted to contribute to the field of education. He asked me these questions in hopes of inspiring me and shaking up some ideas. All I knew is that every day I was consumed by guilt. So the motivation for my Master’s project stems from my guilt as a working mother and my struggle to balance my home life and my professional life.

The guilt

The guilt is always there: I feel guilty every morning as I get ready for work because I know I will be leaving my son. I feel guilty that I often leave before he wakes up. Although doing so allows me to leave work promptly at the end of the day, I also feel it selfish because it is that much harder to leave him once he is awake and wanting attention. I feel guilty that everyday I spend 50 minutes in my car- 50 minutes that could be spent on work or with my child and husband. I feel guilty that while I am at work someone else is spending the entire day with my son. They will see some firsts that I will miss; they will teach him his animal sounds and console him when he is hurt. I feel guilty for all the moments that I will miss each day.
At work I think of my son and again there is guilt. When I am too busy and not thinking of him I feel even guiltier for forgetting about him. When I spend a Saturday morning at work preparing so that the upcoming week flows smoothly I am once again away from my son and feeling guilty. But when I stay home all weekend I worry about the disservice it causes my students. I will be disorganized on Monday morning and the quality of my lessons will not meet my own expectations. The chromatography science experiment that I have been meaning to do will be pushed to the end of the week or to next week so that I can prepare the materials. And then there is the extra time I give my students to complete assignments that I would not normally give, like for a good copy of their descriptive paragraph or an art project. So I feel guilty about the education my students are receiving.

Then there is always the “before I had. . .” guilt I feel when I wish things were simpler. Before my son was born I got to think about my wants and about me generally more often. When I was single, I did not have to constantly make decisions with my husband in mind. My life was so different when I was a new teacher; my focus was my students and the program of studies. Of course I would not actually give up my perfect little family, but I dream of it for a brief second in weak moments, so the guilt sets in again.

The influence

The daily struggle of trying to find balance between home lives and work lives, all while dealing with the guilt, is a reality that many working women face (Chalofsky, 2003; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010). I believe that mothers are raised, as women, to
view themselves as primary caregivers, a view that society tends to reinforce; they are therefore more likely to struggle with the idea of returning to work. I am not the only mother to struggle with leaving her child in the care of others while returning to work.

A fellow co-worker who has two children found it most difficult to return to work after her second child. She felt torn in two directions and guilty when she returned after the birth of her first, but said that it was worse after her second. She found that leaving two children in the care of someone else was more difficult because she felt more of a need to be home with them. Her workload at home had also increased with adding an extra family member. Another colleague, who has an only child, echoed many of the same feelings. She felt guilty for being away from her daughter and for feeling ineffective in the classroom. She said that finding a great nanny helped ease some of the guilt she felt in addition to helping with many of the domestic duties that were falling by the wayside.

Although my focus is not specifically working mothers in the education sector, I think it is important to address since it is relevant to my context. According to “A Transformation in Progress” (Alberta Education, 2012), 71% of educators in Alberta are female, and I make the assumption that many of these women are mothers or intend to become mothers. These women will most likely face similar struggles and questions as I did. Do I stay home to raise my children? Do I return to work? Can I work part time? Can we afford to live on one salary? Who will look after my child while I work? How will I fit everything (work responsibilities, domestic duties, fitness,
faith, friends, family, etc.) in? When these mothers return to work they will have to make adjustments in their own expectations and may face unrealistic expectations from colleagues or administrators. They will need to learn to manage the guilt and balance life both at home and at work.

**My project**

In my school district there is no support offered to mothers returning to work after maternity leave. I intend to create a return-to-work package for teachers in my district that would include helpful tips and links for dealing with stress related to work-life balance and finding appropriate childcare and provide contact information for support.

I hope that my project will help shed some light on the daily struggle felt by working mothers to find work-life balance. I hope that along the way I will find strategies to help me personally manage my guilt and that this project will help other mothers with their guilt.

**This document**

The following chapter is a literature review that highlights work-life balance and the factors that affect the working mother’s return-to-work. In the third chapter, I discuss the creation of my online space for support and discussion, as well as the idea of a return to work package for my school district. Finally I will reflect upon the entire process of completing this project.
Chapter 2

Introduction

Through this project I intend to explore the conflicts working mother’s face as they return to work after having a child. I will also delve into the many struggles of working mothers as they attempt to achieve work-life balance and manage their feelings of guilt. This literature review will outline the difficult transitions many women face in order to have both a successful career and a family. The purpose of this study is to help working mothers with their transition from maternity leave back to their careers.

This chapter will begin with a focus on balance, specifically the balance between work life and home life, as well as the importance in finding meaning in our lives and the imbalance many of us feel. Next, it will explore the working mother’s process when reentering the workforce, looking at options such as opting-in fully, opting in-between or opting-out; there is also a focus on struggles and challenges upon re-entry. Finally, this chapter previews my project, which will be outline in chapter three.

Balance

This project considers the challenges faced by working mothers as they return to the workforce and has personal meaning for me as I have been experiencing such a transition in my own life. Before addressing the issue of the movement from the home back into the workplace following maternity leave, I will explore the literature and ideas around the concept of balance and work-life balance in general.
What is balance? The process of finding balance is a challenging and elusive exercise for many working mothers. The Oxford English Dictionary defines balance in several ways. As a noun it can be described as the even distribution of weight so that someone or something is steady; as equal proportions; or as a counteracting force (Oxford University Press, 2015). As a verb, the term is characterized as holding something in a stable position (Oxford University Press, 2015). Guest (2002) describes balance as having a physical and psychological meaning as “stability of body or mind” (p. 261).

The focus of my project is on the struggles working mothers face when trying to find work-life balance, which is very relevant to my context as I have recently returned to work and am struggling to balance my time and energy between my home life and work life. So for my project it is necessary to discuss the literature with a more specific focus on work-life balance.

What is work-life balance? Of particular interest for my project is the perspective on work-life balance that every individual will define balance differently. Since we all have different limitations and different personal expectations our view of what work-life balance looks like will in turn be different. In their study, Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2010) asked their participants to define balance and discovered that having work-life balance is subjective depending on the individual’s perspective. Therefore the way I view the balance between my work and life will differ from that of my friends and colleagues.

Work-life essentially refers to “work and the rest of life” (Guest, 2002, p. 262).
“The rest of life” suggests one's family obligations, free time, leisure time, and domestic responsibilities (Guest, 2002). Work-life balance has been defined as the “reconciliation of work, family and individual self demands and time” (Grady & McCarthy, 2008, p. 600). It is not only the balance of work and personal life but also the spiritual life (Chalofsky, 2003). Grady and McCarthy (2008) believe that balance is achievable through organization and planning of “personal and family lives” as well as relying on support systems and adaptability in the workplace (p. 314). The Work Foundation (2008), states that work-life balance is achieved when a person's life is fulfilled both inside and outside of their paid work.

Having explored numerous definitions of work-life balance I now understand it to be two sides of life that a person tries to identify him or herself within separately and as a whole. Much of the literature and indeed my own personal experience demonstrate that work-life balance is not easily attainable and is often, in fact, unachievable.

Control is one factor that can affect the attainability of work-life balance is. A person having some level of control over where they are employed, when they work and under which conditions they will work will have a stronger sense of a balance between their work and life (The Work Foundation, 2008). Our work-life balance is affected by the choices we make; some decisions are made under our own control, which contributes positively to our sense of work-life balance (Grady & McCarthy, 2008), while others, which are controlled by internal or external factors such as workplace policy or daycare regulations, impede our sense of work-life balance.
The ability to achieve work-life balance is not only affected by a person’s level of control, but also by the level of conflict between life at work and life at home. Some authors have suggested that balance can be achieved when there is a minimum amount of conflict between the demands of work and the demands of home life (Clarke, 2000; Greenblatt, 2002). Frone argues that the most common interpretation of work-family balance must have a “lack of conflict”; however he believes it is more than just a lack of conflict and that it also includes “positive factors such as the enrichment that various roles can provide” (as cited in Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010, p. 341). Trying to ensure a lack of conflict between the demands of work and the demands of home life as a way to attain work-life balance make this feat seem even more unfeasible.

Achieving work-life balance is evidently not simple, though it has a direct correlation to meaningfulness and purpose of life. In the next section, I will explore the connection between work-life balance and finding meaning in life.

**Finding meaning.** Work-life balance is directly connected to the concept of finding meaning because it is by finding meaning we understand the purpose of both our work life and home life and therefore want to achieve our own personal work-life balance. It is in finding the meaningfulness in work and at home that we feel fulfilled, that we feel that our life has purpose (Chalofsky, 2003). To achieve work-life balance and find meaningfulness no one domain (work, family or home) can be dominant, there needs to be an integration of the domains (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). In their 2008 study, Grady and McCarthy found that simply living the work role or the family
role was not enough to find meaningfulness; meaningfulness was in the integration of both.

Working women who become working mothers are required to re-examine the source “of their identity, their values and purpose” (Knight, 1994, as cited in Grady & McCarthy, p. 603-604) because where they find meaningfulness in their lives has most likely shifted. It is because of this shift in their purpose and values that working mothers struggle when re-entering the workforce; simply put their priorities have changed. When I transitioned from being a mother to being a working mother, my values changed drastically. I am no longer interested in working late hours or on the weekends, I participate less in the extracurricular teams and bring less of my work home, all because my son has made my family that much more of a priority.

Finding meaning is subjective because every individual has different needs, desires, expectations and experiences. Since every working mother will have different levels of support in their lives, different career expectations, different children with different needs, among others, they will have differed perceptions of a meaningful life and a meaningful career. Dries, Pepermans and De Kerpel (2008) assert that an individuals’ perceptions of a meaningful life and the purpose of their lives will affect their view of how successful their careers are. Furthermore, the need for fulfillment will affect whether they aspire to be promoted or find satisfaction in their current position (O’Connor, 2001). Working mothers return to work with different values and a different purpose and therefore might not find meaning in the same way as they did before they had children. They might be more satisfied with
working part time or be less disturbed if passed over for a promotion. Maslow (1971) noted that if an individual does not find meaning or purpose in their workplace he or she will not work up to his or her potential (as cited in Chalofsky, 2003). Working mothers who struggle to leave their child for work on a daily basis might find it difficult to see the meaning in their work and therefore won’t be as committed. While other working mothers may welcome the intellectual challenge their job offers over daily domestic duties.

Since work-life balance is difficult to achieve, in this next section, I will study what most of us working mothers are living - the imbalance of work and home life.

**Imbalance.** In the struggle to find work-life balance, working mothers without nannies or other external support are faced with living the imbalance; conflict is the main reason for imbalance. When one of the demands of family obligations, free time, leisure time, domestic responsibilities, or spiritual life collide with another, conflict is created and thus causes the potential for imbalance (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone, Yardley & Market, 1997; Sturges & Guest, 2004). We lead busy lives; therefore work and home are bound to collide (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) again creating an imbalance. While at work, working mothers often feel guilty being away from their children, which distracts them from their work. While at home, working mothers struggle to keep the house clean and prepare themselves for work the next day, all while spending time with their children. Work-life balance is not easily achievable because it is difficult to be both “excellent at work and at home at the same time” (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010, p. 333).
Working mothers tend to struggle most often with work-life balance because they are generally responsible for the majority of the domestic duties and for the child rearing (Craig & Bittman, 2008). When I finish work, I head to the day home to pick up my son and then head home. If I am organized enough I have already begun to prepare supper and will start cooking quite quickly once we are home. I struggle because this is the time my son craves my attention; after all he has been away from me all day long. I try to involve him or distract him as much as I can in order to get supper on the table. Once we have finished supper there is a little time for playing before the bed-and-bath routine begins. Once my son is in bed I find it very difficult to keep up with the domestic duties; supper is often cleaned up but I am exhausted from a busy day and would rather unwind than begin cleaning the house. So as a working mother I feel guilty when I am away from my son during the day, but also guilty when I am trying to keep up with my domestic duties while he is at home with me.

I have discovered in this section that work-life balance is about bringing both work and home life together, learning how to prioritize among them and finding an equal division of labour in the home. From experience, I have found that it is not easily achieved because I always feel that I could do a better job at work and be more attentive at home. In this next section I will explore the process the working mother goes through when returning to work after a maternity leave.
Re-entry process

Fortunately here in Canada mothers are offered employment insurance for a full year of maternity leave. When I first brought my son home it was both exciting and nerve wracking. My husband and I were first time parents who were uncertain and inexperienced. As the weeks passed and our son grew we learned more about him and how to take care of his needs- our job felt easier and easier. I began to really enjoy the time away from work, spent focused on my son and family. It wasn’t until he was about eight months old that I began to worry about going back to work. Friends of mine who were also mothers told me that I should have been looking into childcare and that I may have even left it too long. I had been oblivious, wearing my mommy blinders, and now it was time to face the fact that I would have to return to work. The bliss of being only a mother and a wife would soon be over and I was to become a working mother.

The working mother is typically considered as a woman able to combine both a career and child-rearing (Poduval & Poduval, 2009). To be able to integrate career, family, home responsibilities, and personal time takes a significant amount of organization, coordination, and dedication. A mother who returns to her original position at work once she has completed her maternity leave is choosing to opt-in.

The following section examines the transition from mother to working mother with a focus on the decision to return to work. Next I explore the many demands and challenges as well as the feelings of regret and guilt. Finally I will
address working mothers’ need for support and possible alternative options to returning to full-time work.

**Timing.** Timing plays a meaningful role in the success of a working mother’s return to work. A mother needs time to heal physically from labour and delivery as well as prepare herself mentally and emotionally for her return to work. It takes time to find childcare and make changes to daily routines. Timing also has an effect on the career decisions a working mother makes. In the following sections I will discuss the benefits and challenges of both a longer and a shorter maternity leave. I will also address the effects that timing has on a working mother’s career.

**Longer maternity leave.** In regard to the length of maternity leave, most research suggests that longer leave is more beneficial for the mother and child. In Alberta, mothers are eligible for a year-long maternity leave if they have worked for 52 consecutive weeks and will receive bi-weekly Employment Insurance payments (Maternity and Parental Leave, Government of Alberta website). Although mothers have access to a year of leave, they may not necessarily be in the financial position to take advantage of it and may return to work earlier. However, when looking at the mother’s health, a longer leave is preferable so that she may fully heal physically.

When considering the mother’s stress, a longer leave allows her more time to adapt to the new changes in her life and familiarize herself with her child. As the child grows older the mother will be more comfortable with the changes in her life and will have had time to become more comfortable with the idea of leaving her child in someone else’s care. A longer leave also allows the mother more time to prepare
herself and her family for her to return to work, for example ensuring that her child or children have proper child care and have adjusted to the new routines (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

I was able to take a full year of maternity leave, partly because my school board offers 17 weeks of top-up pay so that my income was nearly the same as before I went on leave and partly because my husband has a good job with great benefits. I had the time to adjust to the new changes in my life and the opportunity to find great childcare. While I did not want to return to work and be away from my son, it was much easier with him being a year old than it would have been if he were only 6 or 8 months; however, a shorter maternity leave is the reality for some women who must return to their careers for professional or financial reasons.

*Shorter maternity leave.* Although most research highlights the benefits of taking a longer leave before returning to work, Wiese & Ritter (2012) suggest that a shorter leave is more beneficial in the professional sense. The working mother will have missed less work time and will therefore have less to catch up on and less material that must be refreshed. I took advantage of the full-year maternity leave and I did notice upon my return that I had missed a fair amount of professional development during my absence. I also found that my colleagues would refer to resources or past projects not realizing that I had been absent during that time. It has not been easy to catch up as new things seem to pop up and again I need to be filled in.
Despite the professional benefits, however, returning to work after a shorter leave can affect the mother’s confidence. When dealing with stress she may feel that she is under too much pressure because she has not had enough time to adjust and adapt to her new situation (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

Aside from the duration of the maternity leave, timing plays a role in the working mother’s career path. I will explore this idea further in the next section.

**Career orientated.** Even as women decide to opt-in and return to their previous employment status, for many of them their career paths will change. As is less common with men, women’s career paths are quite dynamic (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010). Employees typically work hard to move up the ladder; however, for women with families the path is less linear. In their book, *The opt-out revolt: Why people are leaving companies to create kaleidoscope careers*, Mainiero & Sullivan (2006) suggest that women’s career paths are often different from men’s and propose a new theory, the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM). They believe that women will focus on different aspects of their careers at different times in their careers (as cited in Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010). For example, they may put off a promotion because it involves a heavier workload or more hours, or may work part-time until their children are school aged.

Timing has a significant effect on a working mother’s return to work. The purpose of a maternity leave is to allow the mother to heal physically, to adjust to the changes in her life and routine, to bond and to enjoy time with her child. The length of the leave can greatly affect a mother’s transition back to work.
Timing also plays a role in a working mother’s career choice and advancement because having a family can change a mother’s perspective and priorities. People’s priorities are always shifting because they are living new experiences and making new choices that affect their lives. In the next section, I examine the changing priorities of the working mother.

**Priorities.** Our priorities evolve as we evolve. At different times in our lives our priorities can be about personal satisfaction, family, friends, possessions, and careers, among many other motivations. I noticed a drastic change in my priorities when my son was born. My husband and I were no longer the top priority; this little child was our focus. When a mother returns to work, the priorities she had before having children will likely have changed.

Grady and McCarthy (2008) argue that the working mother has different priorities than a stay-at-home mother or a childless, working woman. For the working mother, her family and children are the most important, although mothers also identify their careers as important, it takes second over family. So why opt-in? Why not stay at home with their children and focus on their families? For some women it is the “need for intellectual stimulation and creativity” (Grady & McCarthy, 2008, p. 609), for others it is a financial need, and then there are those who find meaning in integrating both their family lives and their work lives (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Working mothers who manage to achieve work-life balance will often reap benefits, such as financial gains and personal satisfaction (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010).
Despite the fact that more women are participating in the workforce and that society is more accepting of this new role, attitudes around working mothers have hardly changed (Flaskerud, 2012). In a General Social Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, interviewees’ general consensus was that women with young children should not work full-time, and that part-time work was more acceptable. It is difficult for a working mother to set her own priorities when the general public does not believe she should be working full-time. This gestures toward some of the many challenges that working mothers face.

Once a mother returns to work she is faced not only with similar demands as before her leave, but also with new ones because of the changes to her life. In the next section, I will address the demands and challenges of a working mother.

**Demands and Challenges.** The transition from mother to working mother creates demands and challenges both at home and with work. In the following sections I will discuss the demands and challenges a working mother faces at home and at work. I will also explore the effect of other people’s opinions on the working mother.

**Domestic.** When a mother is at home on maternity leave her focus is on her child or children, the family, and the home. Ensuring that the children’s needs are met, that meals are prepared and that the domestic duties are attended to are generally all part of the mother’s daily responsibilities. However, when a mother returns to work and takes on the role of working mother, more demands are placed on her plate and her time is stretched. Over the past several decades, women’s
presence in the workforce has increased drastically (Grady & McCarthy, 2008), which means that more women are choosing to work rather than stay at home. In Canada, working mothers who work full time spend an average of 40 hours per week and 8 hours per day at their jobs (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). This is time that cannot be spent on their domestic duties or with their families.

Once they return to work, working mothers struggle with the inability to continue doing everything they were already doing at home, while working. As compared to fathers, mothers tend to have more responsibility when it comes to housekeeping and taking care of the children (Craig & Bittman, 2008). Many families choose to share the domestic responsibilities, but this can be challenging for both partners (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). When I returned to work, my husband found it difficult to change his routine and begin spending time after work on cleaning since he hadn’t been responsible for it while I was at home on leave. Whereas I found it difficult because I had been responsible for the childrearing and domestic duties before my return to work and did not want to admit that I could not balance them with working full time.

Not only do working mothers struggle with having less time to dedicate to their domestic responsibilities, but they also struggle with having less time for their children. They may miss out on soccer games or piano lessons, supper, and even bedtime. Working mothers may also not be around enough to prepare fresh, home-cooked meals or encourage their children to make healthy lifestyle choices (Brown, Broom, Nicholson, & Bittman, 2010). They may also feel that the time spent away will
negatively affect their children’s development. Although there is research stating that children of working mothers who “return to work before the child is 3 years old are no more likely to act out or fail at school than children whose mothers are full time [sic] homemakers” (Flaskerud, J., 2012, p. 561), working mothers will often feel more blame when their child struggles, fails or acts out.

Another challenge working mothers face is finding time to spend on themselves. Many women find that by trying to balance their work and home lives that personal time falls by the wayside (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). I know that I spend less time exercising because after my son has spent all day at the day home I do not want to miss any more time with him.

Working mothers face many challenges because balancing both career and motherhood is extremely difficult and “to do justice to each without neglecting the other is a formidable task” (Poduval & Poduval, 2009, p.64). Since I have addressed many of the demands and challenges placed on the home life of a working mother, I will now focus more specifically on those that affect her career.

**Career.** Trying to merge both the work and home lives in hopes of leading a meaningful life can be problematic and can cause an imbalance among working mothers (Chalofsky, 2003). Working mothers return to work with a whole new set of baggage. Prior to having children, their home lives likely included domestic duties and time spent with their partner, family and friends. Now, as they return to work they have the added responsibilities that come with raising a child. Working mothers must make up for the lost time while on leave.
Wiese & Ritter (2012) describe loss of “human capital” (p. 1800) as one of the demands placed on working mothers. Human capital is defined as the resources that help an individual accomplish his or her job, such as knowledge and skills (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). Individuals gain knowledge and skills “through education, training, and on-the-job experience” (Wiese & Ritter, 2012, p. 1800). As a result, while on maternity leave, a working mother will lose some human capital, which will need to be recuperated upon her return (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). This is on top of her regular work responsibilities as well as those she has at home.

Job description changes can also be challenging for working mothers. They need to keep up with the technology, knowledge and skills, as well as the pressure to respond rapidly. In Guest’s (2002) study, participants noted that the intensity of their work had increased (p.257). Therefore working mothers need to be prepared for the possibility of balancing their home lives with a more intense work life.

As I have already discussed, in the section about work-life balance, achieving work-life balance is very difficult. Unfortunately, this imbalance or conflict in a working mother’s life can lead to burnout and exhaustion which in turn affects her ability to accomplish tasks both at work and at home. (Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010). As I continue to juggle returning to work and finding time for my family, I find the need to take what I call “mental health days”. I take a sick day when I am feeling overwhelmed or stressed in hopes that the time off will allow me to recharge and prevent possible burnout or exhaustion.
Since family comes first for most working mothers they will notice a shift in their career. It is difficult to balance the demands of work and the responsibilities at home and some women are forced to choose between their career and home life (Dex & Joshi, 1999). If it is financially feasible, some working mothers may decide to stop working until their children are school aged. Others may choose to take on fewer responsibilities or work fewer hours. Women are more likely than men to deal with compromises as they attempt to be promoted in their career because of the effort made to balance children and work demands (Auster, 2001).

Working mothers face many demands and challenges both at home and at work. However, there are also the perceptions of those in their community or in our society that can have an impact on their work and family-related decisions, as well as their fulfillment of work-life balance.

**Others’ perceptions.** Over time, our society has become more open-minded to women in the workplace; however, when it comes to working mothers with young children it appears that their attitudes have not changed much (Flaskerud, 2012). Stereotypes still exist about the negative effects “on women, their marriages, and their children, despite . . . evidence to the contrary” (Poduval & Poduval, 2009, p. 71). The working mother’s presence is not the same as a non-working mother, and so some believe that the working mother must overcompensate for her absence (Dillaway & Paré, 2008). The absence of a mother due to work is also often perceived as the cause for children’s troubles at school, for drug abuse and even for divorce (Poduval & Poduval, 2009).
Some people believe that working mothers in careers typically held by men are worse parents than the mothers who stay at home with their children (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). However, the mothers who must work because of financial constraints are seen as equally capable parents as compared to the non-working mothers (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

At work, working mothers who choose flexible options rather than returning full time are often believed to not be as serious about their careers as those without children (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Working women who have children are seen as warmer, but less competent and employers are less interested in “hiring, promoting or educating” (Cuddy, Fiske & Glicke, 2004, p. 711) these women. After having a child, these women are viewed as less “capable or skillful” (Cuddy, Fiske & Glicke, 2004, p. 711) than they were before they had children.

Although many are raised to disregard the opinions of the outside world, this is easier said than done. Returning to work is difficult enough without worrying about how your coworkers or the stay-at-home mothers in your neighborhood will perceive you. Working mothers are faced with many demands and challenges as they return to work. The childrearing and domestic responsibilities that they were managing before their return are no longer their sole focus; they must make room for their added work responsibilities. These demands and challenges help exemplify why working mothers struggle to achieve work-life balance. It is due to this struggle that many working mothers feel regret upon their return to work. I will examine this further in the following section.
Regret. At some point everyone has had feelings of regret, whether it is something as simple as the choice of restaurant or something more complicated like choosing a career path. Feelings of regret stem from an unwanted outcome that you believe would have been different had you made an alternative choice (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Working mothers often have regrets surrounding their return to work after maternity leave. For many regret stems from choices they have made regarding their family and/or their career. Working mothers may regret returning to work early, or returning full time, or their choice of childcare. It is important to note that the vast majority of working mothers do not regret having their children; it is more likely the struggles with parenting, domestic duties or work responsibilities that create regrets (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). Some working mothers who struggle to cope with their regret may find that the feelings of regret prevent them from working to their full potential (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

Sometimes regret is a sign of unhappiness and can inspire a person to rectify the problem. Working mothers may make changes to their professional and/or their domestic responsibilities because of the regret they feel. Given the opportunity, some working mothers dealing with re-entry regret may handle it by quitting, working part-time, working from home or changing career paths all together. The working mothers who decide to “abandon their goals” (Wiese & Ritter, 2012, p. 1800) will generally experience either a sense of relief or a loss of confidence in their abilities.
**Timing.** Timing plays a crucial role in the quality and quantity of a working mother’s re-entry regret. A study on return-to-work regret by Wiese & Ritter (2012) determined that working mothers are less likely to feel regret if they have had a longer maternity leave. The longer leave gives them the opportunity to prepare for their return and make adjustments to their family routines. This increase in emotional stability allows for lower levels of return-to-work regret (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

Working mothers that return to work later also show more resilience when faced with work and family stress (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). The mothers who return after a shorter leave do not cope with stress as well as those who have had a longer leave because they feel overwhelmed with having to balance both work and family.

In Alberta, maternity leave is only for mothers and covers the first 15 weeks post-partum. The following 37 weeks is considered parental leave and is available to either the mother and/or the father (work.alberta.ca). If a mother takes full advantage of the 52 weeks it will make her transition to work easier and hopefully less regretful. Another option is for the father to stay at home for part of the parental leave, while the mother returns to work. Although this means the mother is returning to work sooner, there are still some benefits. Leaving a child in someone else’s care can be difficult and adds stress and worry to the mother as she returns to work. The domestic duties can also become a point of stress once a mother has returned to work and finds her time is stretched. Having the child remain at home with the father allows the mother to return to work without worrying about childcare and will afford the father time to adjust to helping with the domestic
responsibilities. Once both parents are back to work, hopefully the family and work routines are in place and the only major change is childcare.

The problem is that, although it is available to them, most professional men do not take parental leaves for financial or social reasons (Grant-Vallone, & Ensher, 2010). Men who stay at home with their children are sometimes viewed as evading their responsibilities to provide financially for their family (Gerson, 1994; Rubin, 1994, as cited in Dillaway & Paré, 2008). In several homes it is the father who holds the more financially grossing career and therefore it makes more sense for the mother to remain at home for the full parental leave.

All working mothers feel some level of re-entry regret; some have the opportunity to make changes to their career to help ease the regret, while others must learn to cope. Regret is often more distinct when there is still the opportunity for the individual to make changes (Wiese & Ritter, 2012). So the mothers who work for financial reasons and do not have the opportunity to change their work situation may struggle more with feelings of guilt - an area that I will explore in the next section.

**Guilt.** Working mothers are often faced with feelings of guilt. Whether it is from the lack of time spent with their children, domestic duties that are ignored, or work that is completed at a slower pace than normal; working mothers can easily “fall into the trap of feeling guilty and conflicted” (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010, p. 341). Working mothers are more likely to feel guilty when they feel that they have a greater work-life imbalance. Juggling both work and family demands can create a lot
of stress and trying to rectify the imbalance can cause even more added stress. (Guendouzi, 2006). As Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2010) illustrate, working mothers realize that the feelings of guilt are irrational, yet it is difficult to turn them off.

Through my own experiences I have noticed that my feelings of guilt started to fade as time passed because we have settled into our routines and my son enjoys the time he spends at the day home and with our extended family. It is because of the support we have received that I feel less guilty and am more able to find work-life balance. The next section examines the working mother’s support system.

**Support.** For a mother returning to work a network of support is essential to her success. First, having reliable childcare will ease some of the worries felt from leaving her child or children in someone else’s care. Second, support from the work environment is also necessary to a working mother’s re-entry into the workforce. Flexibility will allow a mother to more successfully merge her two worlds, thus strengthening her commitment to the company or organization (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Finally, domestic responsibilities are difficult to fulfill while working and focusing on family; therefore, a supportive spouse is crucial. Sharing in the domestic duties and childrearing will alleviate some of the returning mother’s stress (Grady & McCarthy, 2008).

A network of support can greatly ease a working mother’s feelings of regret and guilt as she returns to work. Some mothers who cannot return to work in the same capacity may choose to “opt in-between”. The next section highlights some alternative options to returning to work full time.
Can’t opt-in? Why not opt in-between? Many working mothers find it difficult to opt-in and return to work full time. Many of them choose other options giving them more flexibility in their work; this is referred to as opting in-between. Grady & McCarthy (2008) describe flexibility as being formal or informal. Examples of formal flexibility include options such as working from home, job-sharing, reducing work hours, changing jobs or organizations, or becoming a consultant (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Importantly, Wiese and Ritter (2012) remark that a decrease in working hours often leads to a decrease in work-life stress. Informal flexibility gives the employee the option of having time off for family emergencies or medical appointments (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). When the workplace supports flexible options, their working mothers are more likely to feel success in their careers and have less work-family stress. This in turn produces more positive, effective and committed employees (Chang, Chin, & Ye, 2014).

Another way for working mothers to opt in-between is self-employment. This allows mothers to create job parameters that allow for flexibility in their schedule and for the recognition of their limits, ensuring that the needs of the mother and family can be met (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Opting in-between not only refers to a shift in careers; it is also a shift in mindset. Working mothers must realize that being perfect is not realistic and that compromise and balance are about changing their own self-expectations and “keeping [their] options open” (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010, p. 344).
Since options for flexibility within a career are not always suitable for or available to everyone there is always the option of opting-out (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Some mothers decide to return to school in order to find a career more suitable to their family needs (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Working mothers who are more financially stable may decide to stop working completely and remain at home with their children (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

For working mothers to find work-life balance and to feel successful both at home and at work they need to find a fit that suits them and their families. Sometimes making changes and opting in-between is the better fit.

**Conclusion**

Many working mothers who struggle to find work-life balance believe it is helpful to reach out to others by sharing their journeys through blogs and websites.

In her article, “Letter to working mothers: Stop feeling so guilty,” Margie Warrell discusses the feelings of shortcomings many mothers encounter. Mothers’ guilt causes mothers to feel like they are inadequate and could be doing a better job.

One of her realizations is quite illuminating: “I didn’t have children in order to spend my life feeling forever inadequate. I wanted to enrich my life, not enslave my conscience.” As I struggle to deal with my own feelings of guilt I find it important to remember why I chose to have children and why I chose to return to work. Her idea of stopping the “should” and realizing that I am in fact doing the best that I can for my family at this time. I can be a perfectionist and find it hard to lower my bar to
“good enough,” which is why reading these blogs and hearing the stories of other mothers dealing with the same situation as me is so helpful.

Katherine Lewis’ “Dealing with working mom’s guilt, whether you love or hate your job” also highlights working mothers’ guilt and provides simple ways to help the working mother deal with their feelings. For example, writing down the reasons you work to remind yourself why you made that choice, avoiding people that make you feel guilty by pointing out the things you are missing, taking the time to mourn the things you know you will miss, and taking time away from work to spend time with your child. She underscores the importance of remembering that you are not alone; other working mothers face similar challenges. Our lives are forever changing and as difficult as it is to be away from my son on a daily basis, this is only one part of his life.

In order to reach out and help working mothers like myself I intend to create a return-to-work package for my school district. This package would include helpful tips and links for dealing with stress related to work-life balance and finding childcare and would provide contact information for support. Through this project I hope to assist other working mothers as they transition from being at home with their children to balancing both home life and work.
Chapter Three - My project

Introduction

I have divided the third chapter of this capstone paper into three sections. First I will revisit my motivation for this project and will relate my driving question to my project idea. Next, I will propose how I intend to discover if there is a need for my project idea by collecting data through my peers, the community and online. Finally, I will discuss my intended project idea and how it can be offered to address the needs of others in my situation.

Part 1

My journey. When I first decided, eight years ago, that I wanted to complete my Masters in Education I was a new teacher. My uncle, who is also a teacher and had just finished his Masters, told me to wait until I was a more seasoned teacher. He said that the life experiences I would gain would assist me in my course work. I have gained many life experiences over the past eight years. In the intervening eight years, the most influential was the birth of my son, which transitioned me from being childless to a mother.

This past year I have embarked on another significant transition from mother to working mother. It is in this transition that I found the motivation for my project. I have struggled with my return to work, as have many other mothers before me. It isn’t easy trusting someone else to take care of my son’s many needs. It isn’t easy being at work away from him and missing out on the many little moments.
The first step in this transition was to find childcare. We were fortunate that through our research and connections we found a fantastic day home that takes wonderful care of our son. It has helped ease the worry knowing that he spends his days playing with his new friends. Our son has transitioned so well to the new childcare routine and loves to be at day home, which has made our transition easier.

Next I needed to prepare myself for returning to work. This meant that our family routines needed to be significantly adjusted. While on leave I took on more of the domestic responsibilities, but I knew that upon my return to work fulltime that I would not have the time or energy to keep up with the cooking and cleaning. My husband and I both needed to adapt our routines and our family responsibilities.

Once we were more comfortable with our home routine I needed to prepare myself mentally for returning to work. I had been on maternity leave for 12 months and knew that I would have some catching up to do in the field of education and at my school level. Since I was returning to the same school and grade I was able to lean on my colleagues and friends for support while I tried to make up for lost time. During my absence our district implemented Transform, a new framework, and over the past year my colleagues had received in-servicing and had begun to implement the changes. When I returned to work I found myself often asking coworkers for clarification because although they understood, I lacked the background knowledge. I was also forewarned by my colleagues that the structure of our long range plans had changed from being the individual teacher’s choice to a much more thorough format provided by our administrator.
Being organized and feeling prepared to return to work helped me mentally adjust to the idea of returning to work. Now I needed to focus on balancing both my home and my work life. This is where my struggle began to intensify. I began to constantly feel guilty. The guilt was twofold. I felt guilty being away from my son and worried that by working I was somehow doing him harm. But I also felt guilty that I spent less time outside of school hours doing preparation work and didn’t assist as often with extracurricular teams and activities. I worried that I was doing a disservice to my students by not being able to fully dedicate myself like I had when I was childless.

So here is where my project idea came to light. Having had many conversations with colleagues at work and with mothers in my “mommy groups” I knew that I wasn’t the only mother who struggled to return to work after maternity leave. I wanted to know how working mothers were able to find balance in their home and work lives. As the year has progressed and my guilt has begun to fade I want to be able to help other working mothers as they return to work. I believe that if there had been a more concrete support system in place upon my return, it would have eased my transition. So I want to offer support to teachers who are transitioning from mother to working mothers.

My project. Once I had completed my literature review I didn’t know exactly how I wanted to offer my support. Having accessed several blogs that offered advice on how to find work-life balance, how to support your children through the transition and how to deal with the guilt and regret, I thought about creating my own blog or
online share space with links to helpful websites (Cohn, D and Caumont, A., 2014; Lewis, K.; Lilley, C., 2011). I recently attended a maternity leave information session put on by my district and union to inform employees about maternity leave options, such as mothers taking the full year leave, mothers taking only part of the leave, mothers sharing the leave with the father and rules around leaves for adoption. We received an information package and were able to pose questions to representatives from our union, our district, and our health and benefits provider. When I left the meeting I began to wonder why a similar session regarding returning to work after maternity leave wasn’t also offered, or least an information package. The wheels had begun to turn and my project idea started to become clearer.

My driving question for this project is based on how working mothers find work-life balance upon returning to work after maternity leave. An imbalance is generally caused by conflict between work life and home life (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone, Yardley & Market, 1997; Sturges & Guest, 2004). After completing my research I believe that preparation (Wiese & Ritter, 2012), knowledge (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and support (Grady & McCarthy, 2008) are key to having any success in finding work-life balance.

Timing is a huge factor in being prepared to return to work. During the maternity leave session offered by my district and union they spoke a great deal about timing. We learned about the importance of timing our departure from and our return to work with the school year, the maximum length of our leave and the pay
we would receive at different points. We are fortunate in Alberta to have the option to take a full year of maternity leave; this allows the mother more time to heal physically, to find appropriate childcare and to begin getting herself and her family organized for her return to work. Mothers more often take on the majority of the housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities, as compared to the fathers (Craig & Bittman, 2008); therefore before returning to work a plan should be implemented to alleviate some of the mother’s workload.

In my opinion, it is essential for mothers to be well informed prior to returning to work. Having all the necessary information prior to making any decisions will help alleviate some of the working mother’s regret and guilt upon her return. Information that I believe to be most valuable is in regards to childcare. Mothers need to be informed on the different options available, such as day home, daycare or government regulated care, what questions to ask a potential childcare provider, government rules and regulations, and even what to look for during a visit to the daycare or day home.

It is also important for working mothers to be aware of their options for returning to work. Some mothers may have the opportunity to opt-in between, for instance reducing their work hours or choosing to extend their leave. I also believe that it is important for a working mother to be aware of what she may have missed while on leave and what the expectations are upon her return. Having been away from work for a long duration, working mothers miss out on some of the resources,
such as knowledge and skills, which their employer provides (Wiese & Ritter, 2012).

They therefore need to be made aware of what must be regained upon their return.

Support from family, friends, co-workers and employers is key to the success of a mother returning to work. Since there are so many changes happening in the life of a mother returning to work it is essential that she have support from her partner with domestic and child-rearing responsibilities. Support in the workplace will help the mother transition more smoothly into the new role of working mother.

It is for the many reasons I have just discussed that I have decided to plan my project as an informational piece for mothers returning to work after maternity leave. I intend to create an informational package, in order to support the working mothers in my district who are returning to work after maternity leave.

In the following section I will explore how I would intend to go about gathering a needs assessment and how I would find the information that is presently available to mothers returning to work.

Part 2

Gathering foundational information. Seven months ago, when I first embarked on this project, I was a mother who had just returned to work two weeks prior after spending a year on maternity leave with my son Lincoln. I was feeling very overwhelmed by the transition and extremely guilty whenever I spent time away from him. As I look back on my progress over the past seven months I know that I am now in a better place, but wish that I had had more support from the very beginning. Through this project I hope to reach out and support mothers making the transition
to working mother. Upon my return to work I struggled to find a balance between my work life and my home life. Through this project I intend to create a resource that my school district can offer to mothers going on maternity leave to help prepare them and assist them with their transition back to work.

I contacted a human resources representative with my district as well as the Executive Director of my union and they both confirmed that neither offers any support for mothers returning to work. The human resources representative with my district did say that they were trying to come up with an easier way for mothers to return part-time instead of full-time, but that it was still in the planning stages.

My peers. Now that I have confirmed that my school district and my union do not offer any general support to mothers returning to work after maternity leave I need to discover the need. I will gather a needs assessment by sampling mothers that work in my school district. I intend to use a mixed methods data collection, which will include a questionnaire and small group interviews. In the following sections I will delve into mixed methods research, then examine the survey method, followed by the interview method.

**Mixed Methods.** Mixed methods research is placed between the two extremes of quantitative research and qualitative research with the goal of considering multiple points of view (Johnson B., Onwuegbuzie, A. & Turner, L., 2007). Based on the analysis of 19 definitions supplied by a variety of leaders in the mixed method field, Johnson B., Onwuegbuzie, A. and Turner, L. (2007) have created the following general definition:
Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

For the purposes of gathering a needs assessment I have decided to administer a survey, which is quantitative, and small group interviews, which are qualitative. I intend to collect the data sequentially, first administering a survey followed by the small group interviews, because I believe that the information gained from the survey will help lead the questioning for the interview process.

Survey. According to Gibbs (2012) a survey is the collection of a relatively small amount of data by sampling a large amount of people. This is achieved through a standardised form; therefore everyone receives the same set of questions. A survey is given to a known population, which is decided according to the research question. Surveys generally take form of a questionnaire, but can also be an interview or through observations (Gibbs, G. 2012).

Questionnaire. I have chosen to conduct a simple survey because I want a snapshot of situation at this time. I have chosen to follow the format for carrying out a survey offered by Gibbs (2012).

First, there is the initial design, which includes creating a sample design and making decisions regarding sampling. To determine what I want to achieve by this survey I return to the reason for this project. I am interested in how mothers find
balance between their home life and work life once they return to work after maternity leave. Therefore, through this survey I intend to learn if working mothers feel that they would benefit from an information package or session while on maternity prior to their return to work. I would also hope to gain an understanding of what kind of information the working mothers would expect to receive. These topics will guide the creation of the questions for my questionnaire.

Gibbs (2012) referred to the process of sampling as important mainly if the known population is quite large. The intention of my project is to reach out to mothers returning to work that are also teachers within my district. I intend to survey teachers in my district that are working mothers who have already gone through the transition from mother to working mother, as well as teachers who are pregnant and those currently on maternity leave. Sampling the mothers who have already made the shift will incite them to reflect on their experiences and comment on what changes may have improved the transition. Through sampling pregnant and new mothers, I can gain an understanding of what they believe would be beneficial to them to help ease the transition.

Second, there is the construction of the questionnaire and its piloting. Once the questionnaire has been created, it is important to have people that won’t be sampled review the questionnaire in order to improve the quality and clarity of the questions. I intend to share my questionnaire with colleagues within my district who have long since gone through the transition since they won’t be part of my sample
group. I will also share it with friends who are not necessarily teachers to get an outside perspective.

Next is the actual carrying out of the survey. This is where the delivery method of the survey is decided. There are advantages and disadvantages to delivering it remotely, such as by email or mail. Although it is anonymous, time saving and cost efficient it may suffer a lower response rate and it is more difficult to detect any ambiguities because the researcher is not physically present during its completion. Doing a hand-out will help ensure a higher response rate, will encourage people to take the survey seriously and will allow for clarifications if necessary. However, it is more time consuming and can be more difficult to survey a larger number of people. For my project I intend to use a hand-out that will be given to any teachers that contact the district or the union for information regarding maternity leave. Unfortunately this will not allow for any clarification, but will help me reach a larger number of potential participants. The questionnaire will also be given to those teachers who attend the maternity leave information session offered by the district and union. In this situation, the clarification of questions will be made possible by the physical presence of the participants.

Once the survey has been completed, it is necessary to edit and code, which entails making sense of the information and translating the answers into numbers. The goals of my questionnaire are to (1) determine the degree of need for my project and (2) determine the type of information that the mothers would find valuable. So
at this stage I will be regrouping the data to determine the level of district support wanted by the mothers and the type of information they would find helpful.

During the next phases of computer entry, editing, analysis and interpretation, the results are interpreted and for large surveys the scales are adjusted. Here, I will examine my results to help me determine the involvement of my project. The information I collect will also help me determine the type of information to offer in my informational package.

Finally, the survey process is finished with a write up of the results. I will be using the information from this questionnaire to guide the creation of the informational package. I also intend to conduct small group interviews; the results obtained through the survey will assist me in the creation of the questions for my interviews.

When creating my questionnaire I intend to follow the structure offered by Gibbs (2012). I have outlined my plan below.

*Designing my questionnaire.* When I begin to create my survey I will first create a title that clearly explains the content of the survey. This will be followed by an introductory paragraph that will provide some general information regarding the survey and how the data will be used. I will briefly explain who I am, my purpose for collecting the data and how I intend to use the results. I will explain that the survey is anonymous, provide instructions on how to properly fill it out and details on how to return the survey to me.
The purpose of my questions is to determine if working mothers would have benefited from more support through the district upon their return to work. I am also interested in knowing what specific information they would have found helpful. I am also interested in learning from mothers to be or new mothers what kind of district support they would be interested in receiving. I have included some sample questions from my survey that can be found in full in Appendix A.

Sample questions:

1. If you will soon be or are currently on maternity leave please answer the following questions:

2. Can you think of anything that may have made the transition from being at home with your child(ren) to becoming a working mother any easier?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How likely are you to</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>return to work part-time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extend your leave to remain at home with your child(ren)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take a temporary leave of absence until your children are school age?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change careers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I will end the survey by thanking the participant and explaining again the best way to return the survey to me.

I intend on conducting small group interviews after I have analysed and interpreted the data from the questionnaire. I am using the interviews as a way to fill any possible voids in the data left after the questionnaire. I am also hoping to receive more in-depth answers to questions that are based on the insights gathered from the questionnaire analysis. Since the interview process is more intimate I hope that the participants will be more comfortable going into detail about their experiences transitioning from mother to working mother.

*Interview.* In the second part of his series Research Interviewing, Gibbs (2011) describes the benefit of using the interview process to acquire in-depth responses to questions. This is possible because the process is flexible, allowing the interviewer to modify their questions to respond to the situation. The interviewer is also able to offer an explanation if a participant needs clarification. An advantage of using the interview process is that non-verbal communication can be assessed by the interviewer (Gibbs 2011). Facial expressions and body language offer additional information over and above the verbal responses.

Through small group interviews, I would hope to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experiences mothers have gone through when returning to work. I want them to speak candidly about their struggles and their successes at home, with childcare and at work. I would like to receive concrete examples of what
they believe would have made the transition easier, as well as information they would hope to find in a returning to work informational package.

In the following section I will examine what support is currently available in my community through my district, my union and community services.

**The community.** The inspiration for this project comes from my own personal experience of transitioning from mother to working mother. I struggled to find balance and have therefore based my project upon the need for additional support for working mothers. This next section will provide some insight into what support is currently available for mothers returning to work through my school district, my union and through health services.

**My district.** I contacted the Human Resources department with Edmonton Catholic School District to inquire on the types of services and support they offer to mothers returning to work within our district. I learned that the district supports mothers by offering a maternity leave information session to ensure that expecting mothers, or women who plan to have children understand the process of taking a maternity leave. The district also offers a top-up option, which supplements the mother’s income for the first 17 weeks of her leave. So while she receives Employment Insurance, she is also receiving a paycheck from the district, which brings her earnings to approximately 97% of her original pay. During this 17-week period she is also receiving full benefits.

When asked specifically what the district does to support mothers that return to work once their leave is terminated I was informed that the district is attempting
to put in place flexible working options. They are looking specifically at encouraging school administrators to promote and accept job-sharing options. The difficulty is that parents often don’t want their child placed in a class with two part-time teachers because they feel that it may be difficult on their child.

I was informed that they do not offer an informational session or package to mothers returning to work that would provide information regarding childcare and transitioning tips.

Since my school district offers the maternity leave session with the support of my union, I also contacted them to learn of any support they offer working mothers.

**My union.** The representative from the Edmonton Catholic Teachers’ Local 54 of the Alberta Teachers’ Association was very interested in the idea of added support for mothers as they return to work. She acknowledged that the ATA and the district offer support to women going on maternity leave, yet nothing for when they return to work.

Both my school district and my union do not offer support to mothers returning to work after maternity leave. Therefore mothers in my district must search out support elsewhere, such as through community services like Child and Family Resource Centres or Alberta Health Services.

**Community services.** There are a wide range of programs available in Alberta to parents searching for information or assistance with parenting strategies, children’s health, and growth development. For the purpose of my project I have
outlined some of the programs that are available in Edmonton and the surrounding area.

*Child and Family Resource centres.* There are many Child and Family Resource Centres spread out over Edmonton and the surrounding area. These centres offer family support programs like home visits to discuss any family issues, concerns or possible goals (Norwood Child and Family Resource Centre). They also offer information for effective parenting strategies and counselling if needed. Several Child and Family Resource Centres are also Parent Link centres, which are funded by the provincial government. These centres provide free play programs for children to encourage physical activity and socialization. The free parenting programs offer support with child growth and behaviour, parenting skills and services such as speech and language resources (Alberta Health Services). The Parent Link centers also provide parents with the opportunity to connect with other parents and caregivers.

*Alberta Health Services.* Alberta Health Services is available online or by calling their Health Link. They offer information for choosing childcare, for recognizing and dealing with postpartum depression and for helping your child deal with separation anxiety.

*Child and family services authorities.* When selecting childcare, Child and family services authorities through the Government of Alberta can offer some assistance. They have a list of government regulated day homes and daycares that they can provide to families. Childcare providers that are regulated by the province must adhere to a set of standards, such as maximum child-to-adult ratios, specific training
and certification as well as regulations regarding facilities and equipment (Parliament of Canada). These childcare providers are subject to inspections in order to keep their status as government regulated.

Although my district and union do not currently offer support to mothers as they return to work, there are many community services that do, such as Child and Family Resource centres and Alberta Health Services. In the following portion I will examine some of the support for working mothers that is available online.

**Online** Turning to the community and government agencies are some of the ways that working mothers can seek support. They also have the option of going online to find information and to reach out to others. In the following section I examine the results given when different search engines are employed. I will also highlight some websites that I believe offer valuable information and support to working mothers.

**Search engines.** When using the search engines I first typed in “support for mothers returning to work post maternity leave”. I then realised that I was also interested in the results that would pertain specifically to Canada so I modified my search slightly and used “support for mothers returning to work post maternity leave Canada”.

The first search engine I used was Google, since it is the most familiar to me. The results for both of my searches can be found in the Appendices as Appendix B. I then turned to Bing as a search engine since it is the default engine at my work. The results are listed as Appendix C in the Appendices. Finally I used Yahoo because it is a
search engine that I generally never use. The results from the Yahoo search are listed as Appendix D in the Appendices.

Similarities. I compared my first Google search with Bing and found that the only common website was a link to the Mayo Clinic. There were no further commonalities. When I checked my Yahoo search the Mayo Clinic link was also the first one to appear. When I compared Yahoo with my Google and Bing results I discovered that Yahoo and Bing gave identical results. I then compared the results from my second Google search with Bing and Yahoo. Again, Bing and Yahoo displayed identical results. However, this time there were a few more similarities between them and Google. They both offered links to the government of Manitoba and Ontario sites as well as Canadian Business a website that offers information regarding Canadian economic issues. There was also a similar link to Baby Center, a parenting website.

Differences. When I compared my first Google search with Bing and Yahoo I observed that Bing and Yahoo offered a larger variety of websites. Google offered a health services website, one intended for mothers, another one intended for women and five for general parenting. Whereas the Bing and Yahoo search offered one health services website, one intended for mothers, another one intended for women, two for general parenting, as well as websites for the government of UK and the government of Manitoba, a journal article from the Huffington Post and a link to eHow, a how to website.
The differences in my second search saw Google offer more variety, including articles from MacLean's and Readers Digest, a Québec law website, an Alberta human rights website and an informational blog about money. Bing and Yahoo resulted in the same Mayo Clinic link as the first search, a Government of UK link, a parenting website and a website intended for mothers.

Having realized that Bing and Yahoo were identical I decided to search using Dogpile as well (see Appendix E). Dogpile returned with many of the same links as Google, Bing and Yahoo, yet had more advertisements for finding jobs.

**Appropriate websites.** There are a multitude of websites available for working mothers. I will comment on the websites uncovered through my searches as well as another that I came across during the research and creation of my project.

* Mayo Clinic. Since the Mayo Clinic appeared on all of the engines I perused it first. The article offers tips for returning to work by starting with what mothers should do before they return to work, as well as after they have returned to work. The tips are bulleted for easy reading and the article concludes with a reminder to let go of the working mother guilt.

* Mommy blogs. There are many mommy blogs that share the different experiences of other mothers, such as Scary Mommy and Working Moms Against Guilt. Many of the blogs I visited offer different tips to help ease the transition from mother to working mother. They all reference the need for excellent childcare, a great support system and time to adjust to the new routine while dealing with the guilt.
Best Start. Best Start is a website for Ontario’s maternal, newborn and early child development resource centre. They promote healthy initiatives for expecting parents, new parents, newborns, and young children (Best Start). They have created a guide to support mothers as they return to work after maternity leave. The guide encourages mothers to explore their work options and give tips for choosing childcare, planning your time, establishing a routine taking care of your child and yourself (Best Start). This guide is user friendly and easy to read (see Appendix F). It is also Canadian, which means that the information given is based on Canadian guidelines, like the Canada Food Guide.

The internet is an immense source of information that is readily available. Working mothers who may not feel comfortable or may not have the time to connect with Child and Family Resource centres or Alberta Health Services may choose to find support and advice online instead.

Through my research and my own personal experiences I understand the important role support plays in a mother’s transition to working mother (Grady & McCarthy, 2008). I also believe that being prepared (Wiese & Ritter, 2012), and properly informed (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) have a great impact on a mother’s work-life balance. In the following section I will outline my project plan that intends to offer support and advice to mothers returning to work post-maternity leave in my district.

Part 3
**Introduction.** When I first began this project I had only been back to work for a few weeks after my maternity leave. I was constantly overwhelmed with feelings of guilt for leaving my child while I went to work. Logically I understood that due to our financial situation I had no other option but to return to work. Emotionally, however, I felt that I was abandoning my child and entrusting someone else to raise him. Not only did I struggle with the guilt of feeling like a bad mother, I also felt like a bad teacher. I didn’t volunteer for as many clubs and extracurricular activities, I was putting less time into planning and I left the building as soon as possible each day, so as to spend time with my son.

It is through these experiences that I found my driving question. I wanted to know how working mothers could possibly find work-life balance upon returning to work after maternity leave. My research has led me to believe that preparation (Wiese & Ritter, 2012), knowledge (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) and support (Grady & McCarthy, 2008) are key to having any success in finding work-life balance.

I contacted my school district and my union to learn of any support they offered mothers returning to work and was disappointed to learn that no official support was available. The school district would try to possibly work out some flexible options if possible and the union was available to listen to any concerns and offer advice. This confirmed the direction of my project. I want to create an informational package available to the teachers in my district who are mothers transitioning to working mothers.
Information package. The information package will be accessible through my district and my union for all working mothers. The information in the package will be user friendly and cover many subjects like childcare and flexible work options.

Content. In this section I will address the content I would include in my informational package such as the introduction, the table of contents, some different tips for easing the transition and some helpful websites.

Introduction and table of contents. The structure of this informational package will be easy to read and will often use point form so the reader can easily skim over it for the information pertinent to their situation. The introduction will briefly explain that the goal of the package is to get mothers thinking about the future. Although it seems like a long time, since most mothers take advantage of the full year of maternity leave, some daycares have long waiting lists. The package is also meant to offer mothers information on making the transition back to work easier and to provide them with contacts for additional support.

It is important for the package to be user friendly, specifically if a new mother is trying to navigate her way through it. A table of contents will allow the reader to quickly find the wanted sections. I would hope to organize the table of contents in a timeline checklist. For example, a section to read before baby is born, once baby is 3 months old, or once there are 6 months remaining in the maternity leave. This would help mothers find information relevant to their specific situation and not overwhelm them with information that will be important later on.
**Tips for flexible working options within the district.** Presently, the Edmonton Catholic School district does not have a policy in place for flexible work options. Teachers wanting to work part-time must either apply for a part-time position or must find another teacher willing to job share. All part-time positions and job sharing positions must be approved by the school administrator and by the staffing department with Edmonton Catholic Schools. The staffing department is currently working at putting a policy in place that would facilitate job sharing, yet they are still in the development stages.

The information I include in this section of the information package will need to be approved by the district. I will want to include information regarding extended leaves of absence, returning to work part-time and job sharing. I will need to coordinate this with the district to ensure all of the information is correct regarding pay, pension, benefits and district policies.

**Tips for childcare.** This section will explain the different types of childcare available; day home, daycare, government regulated childcare, as well as some of the advantages and disadvantages of each. It will also include a list of possible questions to ask when interviewing a childcare provider (see Appendix G). I would also want to include accurate information regarding government funding or subsidies, as well as income tax implications. I found that I was given different advice and information from my colleagues and other mothers. Having accurate information from government agencies will ensure that mothers do not miss deadlines, funding opportunities or tax benefits.
Tips for time organization. Time becomes more valuable when you are away from your family all day. In order for a working mother to make the most of the time she has with her children, this section will provide tips to save time. Planning and preparation are key to effective time management. This section will provide simple tips, like planning meals for the full week to avoid multiple trips to the grocery store, as well as learning to prioritize. Having a family schedule that is easily accessible will help to maintain organization and prevent miscommunication.

Tips for managing life and work responsibilities. It is difficult to balance both home and work life. This section will remind working mothers to take time away from work for their family and for themselves. It will also highlight some of the feelings of guilt and regret they may experience and how to deal or come to terms with these feelings. There will also be tips on how to share the child rearing and domestic responsibilities with your partner.

Websites and links. Through my research I was able to explore many helpful websites, links and blogs. I will include these as a source of additional information for working mothers. They will be organized by: government and health services and blogs (see Appendix H).

Distribution. In order to reach as many working mothers as possible I plan to collaborate with both my school district and my union to distribute the information packages. I believe that it is crucial for teachers to receive the packages prior to going on leave because some information is time sensitive and once the baby is born, a mother's time is quite occupied.
I would like to have the information packages be available to teachers when they attend the Maternity Leave information session or if they contact the district or the union regarding maternity leave information. Since teachers must give at least one month’s notice to the district before taking a maternity leave, it will give the district time to send an informational package to them.

I intend to contact the technology department with my school district to see if the information packages could be scanned as a pdf and available through our district’s online communication system. It would also create the option of emailing the package to staff rather than using paper, thus making the process more efficient and economical.

**Feedback.** As with all projects, feedback is necessary for improvement. Upon discussion with the district and the union I feel that we could create a brief online questionnaire to determine if the users felt that the information provided was useful and what improvements could be made in the future.

My goal with this project is to try and reach out to as many mothers as possible in my school district and to help them with the transition to working mother. My transition was difficult even with the support of a great day home, wonderful friends and an involved family. I truly believe that had I been better informed about the changes ahead I would have been better prepared. I know that I would have still felt guilty regardless, but I imagine that it wouldn’t have been so overwhelming.

This project is based on my driving question of how working mothers find work-life balance upon returning to work after maternity leave. Through this project I
have explored my own personal feelings of guilt and seen my own growth as I have begun to work through the guilt and regret. I have researched work-life balance, the re-entry process for working mothers with all of the demands and challenges, as well as flexible options. The intentions for my project have been outlined and now I will reflect upon this experience.
Chapter Four

My professional thinking

Introduction. When I received the required reading list for my first two graduate level classes I was overwhelmed. I couldn’t believe how many readings had been assigned and how lengthy many of them were. It wasn’t until I attempted to read the first article, *The Education Imagination* by Elliot Eisner, that I felt completely unprepared to be a graduate student. It took me many attempts to finish reading the article because my thoughts wandered elsewhere as soon as the material became too challenging.

However, once classes began and I realized I wasn’t the only student who had been out of post-secondary schooling for many years the journey seemed a little less daunting. Although the workload was quite heavy, our professor Dr. Nixon helped us to understand the demands and expectations of a graduate studies program. It was in the first few days of classes that I realized my professional thinking had already begun to grow and change. Throughout my graduate studies aspects of my professional thinking have continued to change and while other aspects have been reinforced.

My professional thinking changed. The experiences and the knowledge that I have gained through these graduate studies have had a great impact on my role as an educator. My professional thinking has most certainly changed.
**Practitioner inquiry.** It was through the exploration of practitioner inquiry discussed by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) that I discovered that what I thought was a genuine inquiry project was actually top-down.

Practitioner inquiry is used to describe the process of problematizing-identifying the gaps, researching, and reflecting that in turn leads to “new insights and new ways to theorize practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 37). An important characteristic of practitioner inquiry is collaboration. Collaboration can be viewed as the partnership among school-based educators, university-based colleagues, parents and even community members. All stakeholders have an important perspective, thus there is a need for a shared responsibility among them. Greater involvement from community: critique of the work, greater insights, sharing of different ideas.

When my school decided to implement the Daily 5/Café program we spent time familiarizing ourselves with the key features, creating questions about implementation and planning for instruction. Time was set aside for grade-level and group discussions, professional development sessions were given to further our understanding and we collaborated with a neighboring school that had already implemented the program.

This felt like inquiry to me since we had problematized within our collaboration time. At the time, I believed that collaboration was the opportunity to talk with our district consultants, my colleagues, and teachers who had already gone through the implementation of the program. But as I revisited this experience it
wasn’t collaboration in the true sense described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). We did not have any partnerships with university-based colleagues, parents, community members or even the students.

Another important characteristic of practitioner inquiry is accountability. The goal of practitioner inquiry isn’t to improve test scores, nor should it be used to create more standardized tests. The idea is to “transform teaching, learning, leading and schooling in accordance with democratic principles and social justice goals” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 188). So accountability is ensuring that the identified questions or wondering have emerged from a social condition or practiced tradition that is harmful to students’ learning and that the problematizing of this question leads to a larger movement for social change.

Through my experiences with the implementation of the Daily 5/Café program I understood accountability as the expectations imposed on all teachers to implement the program, observe the students and collect data in the form of reading assessments. We, the practitioners, didn’t in fact problematize- we were directed by administration. We didn’t recognize that there was a need for social change due to injustice.

Curriculum theory and practice. Prior to beginning my graduate studies I saw curriculum as the knowledge and skills the government expected me to teach. I have since gained a more in-depth understanding. I was surprised at the many transformations curriculum has undergone. Such as the responsibilities of creating
the curriculum going from a small group of elite to including the public, or curriculum being based on industrial needs as compared to on the children’s needs.

It was interesting to read about curriculum theories and ideas that were developed in the 1950’ or 1960’s that we are now implementing again as new curriculum. For example, in 1960 Jerome Bruner suggested that students learn more effectively through authentic discovery based learning rather than simply acquiring new information (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). The new initiative in our district, *Transform*, is based upon the idea that the child should develop not only knowledge but also life-long skills through interactive, student-driven projects.

I’ve realized that as educators we don’t necessarily reinvent the wheel, we take what may already exist and adapt and improve upon the ideas.

**My professional thinking reinforced.** Throughout my graduate studies experiences I have shown much growth and my professional thinking has changed immensely. Though, I have also had aspects of my professional thinking reinforced.

**Curriculum ideologies.** It was through reading and discussing Eisner’s ideas on curriculum ideologies that I confirmed my ideologies as Religious Orthodoxy and Progressivism. I knew my beliefs as an educator, but had never identified them by name. I identify with Religious Orthodoxy because I grew up in a Catholic home and have continued with my faith as an adult. This has led me to teach in a Catholic school district. I am also a Progressivist teacher because I have adopted a more problem-centered curriculum. As Progressivists, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue the importance of paying attention to the academic, social, emotional, physical and
spiritual characteristics of the child. These authors have deeply confirmed my understanding that each child is a “custom job” and their culture, community and background influence will influence how and what they learn. As an educator, I am responsible for incorporating the individual culture, social environment and experiences of each student.

I also recognized the struggle caused by the pluralism of ideologies. As an educator I feel responsible to identify with curriculum ideologies that best suit the needs of my students, while taking into consideration my own values and beliefs. However it is difficult to find my place within multiple ideologies, specifically when tensions are created by some of the conflicting ideological views, of Religious Orthodoxy and Progressivism.

Teaching within a Catholic School District, I am held accountable to teach the Program of Studies as a lived curriculum that emphasizes our religious faith. I identify strongly with my faith and believe in the importance of teaching and guiding my students to a more profound understanding of Catholicity. Nevertheless, I struggle with the idea of discouraging students to doubt, to question or to analyze the information presented to them, regardless of the subject content (Eisner, 1995). The Progressivist in me believes in the importance of encouraging students to participate actively in their learning by voicing their wonderings and exploring alternate ideas.

I was always aware of my beliefs and the tensions caused by my multiple ideologies, but it was through my studies that I was able to really recognize my struggle.
**Instructional leadership.** I have been an educator for 8 years and in this time I have worked under three administrators and six different assistant principals. Their methods and beliefs varied and they all had strengths and weaknesses as administrators. My experiences in this graduate studies program have confirmed what I have already experienced in my years teaching, that a strong instructional leader is fundamental to a school’s success.

An effective instructional leader must be able to communicate clearly with his or her staff. Just as our students work better when expectations and routines are clear, teachers are also more efficient when they are well informed. Communication also means that the leader is able to motivate his or her staff and to keep them accountable. There are constantly new best practices being marketed and when a district or a school get on board with a new program the administrator needs to create a sense of buy-in amongst the staff so that they too are on board. An instructional leader is responsible for giving feedback to staff members and to encourage their professional development.

In order to connect with staff and students an instructional leader must be aware of the individual’s context and needs. They can then create positive learning and working environments, as well as offer professional development and collaboration opportunities.

Through the experience of this graduate studies program my professional thinking has changed drastically. This experience will greatly affect any future endeavours in my career.
The influence of my graduate experience

**Introduction.** The many experiences I’ve gained through this program have helped to reinforce or to change my perspectives on education, curriculum and leadership. The impact of my studies will affect my professional career, my school and my district.

**Influence on my career, school and district.**

**Administration.** Part of the reason I decided to complete my Masters in Education is that I intend to eventually move into an administration position. By completing my graduate studies my chances of being selected as an administrator increase greatly.

During the course on instructional leadership I spent some time working with Michael Fullan’s book *Change Leader*, specifically chapter 3 that offered advice for motivating staff. I completed a self-evaluation about motivation to determine my strengths and weaknesses. I discovered that I am a strong communicator and am not afraid to seek help from others. However, I am hesitant to take new risks and do not view myself as an assertive person. Going through this self-evaluation I am more aware of what I bring to the table and what improvements I need to make to become a more motivating leader. This awareness will help me once I am in an administrative position.

During this same course I also spent time reviewing literature on instructional leadership. The key points that I highlighted during this research will also help me with administrative responsibilities. Communication is essential because an
instructional leader needs to create a shared vision amongst all of the stakeholders. Instructional leaders are also responsible for providing constructive feedback to their staff.

Knowing the people is also very important. An instructional leader who is aware of their students’ and staffs’ context will be able to lead more effectively. This will enable them to create a more collaborative working environment. I also learned the importance of motivation, teacher buy-in, collaboration and professional development. Exploring these many fundamental ideas will help me become a better administrator for my school, staff and students.

**Technology.** I now have a greater knowledge of technology and its many educational uses. This has made an impact on my day-to-day classroom instruction. I now make a conscious effort to try and incorporate technology into my lessons or assessments. I feel more comfortable using technology in my classroom; therefore I am more open to my students using technology. I have been giving my students the choice to use technology as a way of demonstrating their knowledge and skills. By giving them more options I feel that I am giving the opportunity to play to their strengths and/or interests.

**My project.** I hope that my capstone project will have an influence on my district and my union. I have suggested the creation of an informational package for mothers returning to work after maternity leave. This package would contain useful information regarding childcare, flexible work options and tips for time management. After speaking with several colleagues and friends who returned to teaching full-time
after maternity leave, I realized that I wasn’t the only one to struggle with the transition. My district provides information for women prior to taking maternity leave, so that they can make informed choices regarding their leave and return dates, as well as benefits. I believe that the same support should be offered to mothers to help ease their transition back to work after maternity leave. Therefore the district could offer an informational package or an information session to reach out to these women.

I sincerely hope that I can make my project idea a reality and be able to reach out to the many working mothers that are teachers in the district. Following I have made some recommendations for educators interested in pursuing my topic.

**Recommendations**

For those educators who are interested in delving into or working with my topic on work-life balance among mothers returning to work after maternity leave I suggest the following three key recommendations.

**Taking action.** My personal experience is what guided me to select this topic. At the beginning of this project I was in a difficult place both emotionally and spiritually because I was constantly consumed by feelings of guilt. However, as the year progressed and I worked through this project I began to feel more positively about working situation and less guilty for leaving my child each. I learned that being active in my struggle was a useful and productive way to address my thoughts and feelings.
I would recommend that when engaging with the struggle to find work-life balance that an active approach is best.

**Self-reflection.** Self-reflection was a huge part of this topic and project for me. When trying to choose a topic I was asked what I was passionate about or what was important in my life. It was through self-reflection that I discovered that the focus in my life at the time was my son and the guilt I felt for returning to work. Many of the ideas for my project, such as information regarding childcare, stem from reflecting back on my experiences over the past year.

Since the beginning of my capstone project I have made a lot of improvement and growth when dealing with my guilt. Some of the change comes from being comfortable with the new routine, part of it is because I took an active approach to my struggle, and the other part is from self-reflection. It is important to take the time to stop and think and to reassess. I don’t remember the exact moment when the weight of the guilt became lighter, but I know that I reflected often through this process and noticed many changes in myself as time went on.

**Empathy.** Showing empathy for those who struggle is a key component of this topic. Before I was a mother I had no understanding of what mothers went through when they returned to work after maternity leave. I knew that it would be difficult, but I never imagined the struggle I would endure.

It is very important that when dealing with the struggle to achieve work-life balance that you demonstrate empathy towards those affected. By trying to understand and share the feelings of another person you are telling them that what
they feel is important to you and that you care. Although you may not understand their struggle firsthand it is important that someone dealing with mother's guilt not feel judged or ridiculed for their feelings. Feelings are not something we can easily control. If I could have I would have decided to not feel guilty, but it wasn’t a decision I could make. They were feelings that I needed to work through myself by taking action and through self-reflection. The empathy demonstrated by others helped to support me through the journey.
References

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http://www.babycenter.com/0_home-daycare-provider-interview_1452147.bc

Best Start. Returning to Work After Baby. Retrieved from:


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Retrieved from: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/08/7-key-findings-about-stay-at-home-moms/


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http://norwoodcentre.com/family-support-program/


Statistics Canada. More employed mothers. Retrieved from:
   http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11387-eng.htm#a4
   Message posted to:
   http://twfold.theworkfoundation.com/difference/e4wlb/definition.aspx
Appendix A

Questionnaire: 

Working Mothers’ Support System

Edmonton Catholic School District wants to improve the level of support given to mothers as they return to work after completing a maternity leave.

We would like your help to improve the level of support currently offered.

By answering these questions you will be helping us to provide support that is appropriate and accessible.

Your responses are voluntary and confidential and you will not be identified from the information you provide. All responses will be compiled together and analyzed as a group.

Please mark the appropriate box with a checkmark. Some questions ask you to mark all parts that apply. Some questions ask for written responses.

Once you have completed the survey you may return it to Human Resources via the interoffice mail courier (IMC) system.

I am currently expecting my first child. □
I am a working mother with 1 or more children. □
I am currently on maternity leave. □

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How satisfied are you with the level of support offered to mothers as they return to work after maternity leave</th>
<th>Very dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>by your school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>by your district?</td>
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<tr>
<td>by the union (ATA)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>by the government run services? i.e. Alberta Health Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you are currently on maternity leave or plan to be on maternity leave in the next 12 months please answer the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How likely are you to</th>
<th>Very unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Very likely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>return to work with decreased hours? i.e. full-time to part-time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>extend your leave to remain at home with your child(ren)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take a temporary leave of absence until your children are school age?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>change careers?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Check off any of the following that apply to you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When I began searching for childcare I had a very limited understanding of how it worked.</th>
<th>When I began searching for childcare I had a general understanding of how it worked.</th>
<th>When I began searching for childcare I had a solid understanding of how it worked.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When interviewing for childcare I did not know what questions to ask.</td>
<td>When interviewing for childcare I knew a few questions to ask.</td>
<td>When interviewing for childcare I knew several questions to ask.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it very difficult to leave my child in the care of someone else.</td>
<td>I found it somewhat difficult to leave my child in the care of someone else.</td>
<td>I did not find it difficult to leave my child in the care of someone else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once I began working again it was a struggle to maintain the house.</td>
<td>Once I began working again it was sometimes a struggle to maintain the house.</td>
<td>Once I began working again the house was maintained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once I began working again there was more conflict between my partner and I.</td>
<td>Once I began working again there was no change in conflict between my partner and I.</td>
<td>Once I began working again there was less conflict between my partner and I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once I began working again I felt unhappier with my life.</td>
<td>Once I began working again I felt the same about my life.</td>
<td>Once I began working again I felt happier with my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once I began working again I felt less satisfied with my productivity at work than before my leave.</td>
<td>Once I began working again I felt the same about my productivity at work as before my leave.</td>
<td>Once I began working again I felt more satisfied with my productivity at work than before my leave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upon my return to work I felt that coworkers were less satisfied with my productivity at work than before my leave.</td>
<td>Upon my return to work I felt that coworkers felt the same about my productivity at work as before my leave.</td>
<td>Upon my return to work I felt that coworkers were more satisfied with my productivity at work than before my leave.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Describe your experience returning to work after maternity leave focusing on the effects on your home life (children, partner, housework, cooking) and work life (responsibilities, productivity).

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

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Can you think of anything that may have made the transition from being at home with your child(ren) to becoming a working mother any easier?

_______________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________

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_______________________________________________________________________
Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your transition from being at home to returning to work with ECSD?

_______________________________________________________________________

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_______________________________________________________________________

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your responses will help us to provide the necessary support to working mothers. Please return this questionnaire to Human Resources through IMC.
Appendix B

Google searches:

Maternity leave: Tips for returning to work - Mayo Clinic
May 3, 2014 - Working mothers face many challenges, but with some planning you can make your return to work schedule so you'll know what's expected of you after your maternity leave. Proceeds from websites advertising help support our mission.

Returning to work after maternity leave | NCT
www.nct.org.uk / Parenting
Information on returning to work after maternity leave with tips on how to make the transition smoothly. Finding the right childcare is the most common concern amongst parents. There are some things you can do to make your return to work less stressful.

Returning to work after maternity leave - Working Moms
workingmothers.com/retuning-to-work-after-maternity
Returning to work after maternity leave can be difficult and emotional. Challenges you may face are some...I'm also new to this whole working mom thing, and I'm trying to be a mom in a world where our kids are important and we need to get back to work.

Return to Work After Maternity Leave - Scary Mommy
www.scarymommy.com/returning-to-work-after-maternity
The New Mom's Guide to Returning to Work After Maternity Leave...Brrr, I am a neurotic new mom...The Scary Mommy Community is built on support.

Back-to-Work 101 -- Baby Caravan
babycredit.com/back-to-work-101
Baby Caravan supports moms returning to work after maternity leave. We are here to help reduce the anxiety, fear and guilt many working moms feel going back...

Life After Maternity Leave - Tips for Going Back to Work

Maternity Leave - Government of Manitoba
www.gov.mb.ca / Labour and Immigration
July 23, 2015 - Maternity leave gives expectant mothers the opportunity to take time off work. The federal government has income support programs to cover certain types of leave. To learn more, call Service Canada toll-free at 1 800 461-6683.

Deciding whether to return to work - BabyCenter Canada
www.babycenter.ca/377406/deciding-whether-to-return-to-work
All my friends are going back to work and I really feel under pressure to do the same...In order to stay at home after maternity and parental leave, we would need to...It may be that we don't want to give up as much as we felt our mothers gave up...from the social side of employment: colleagues, support and adult company.

Is maternity leave a bad idea? - Macleans.ca
Jan 25, 2014 - workplace policies are generally designed to support new parents. Nearly 90% of new mothers took a parental leave, averaging 48 weeks...Few in Canada would argue that paid, job-protected parental leave is a bad...away from work, a penalty that persisted long after they went back to their jobs.

Leaves of Absence | Ministry of Labour
www.labour.gov.ca / Employment Standards - Publications
Feb 6, 2015 - Birth mothers who take pregnancy leave are entitled to take up to 35 weeks of parental leave, usually beginning right after their pregnancy leave ends...job-protected time off work to provide care or support to a specified individual. You can return to work before the end of the week only if your employer lets you return...

The dark side of maternity leave - Canadian Business
www.canadianbusiness.com/business...the-dark-side-of-maternity/...Sep 8, 2011 - Combined with 15 weeks of maternity leave, the legislative change meant that...They can't be sure if the new parents will return after their leave or choose to...In Canada, Employment Insurance covers 55% of new mothers' average...and compensate and support staff who take on an added workload.
Appendix C

Bing searches:

1. **support for mothers returning to work post maternity leave**
   - **Maternity leave: Tips for returning to work - Mayo Clinic**
     - www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/work-life/work-20045478
   - **Returning to Work After Maternity Leave - Employee Rights**
     - www.equity.com/returning-to-work.htm
   - **Returning to Work - Essentials for Working Moms Returning**
     - workingmoms.about.com
   - **Tips for Surviving Your 1st Year After Maternity Leave**
     - workingmoms.about.com
   - **New Moms Talk About Returning To Work After Maternity Leave**
     - www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/08/back-to-work-after-maternity...

2. **support for mothers returning to work post maternity leave canada**
   - **Your pregnancy rights in Canada - BabyCenter Canada**
     - www.babycenter.ca/57668
   - **Checklist of Return to Work Forms - About**
     - workingmoms.about.com
   - **Pregnancy and Parental Leave | Ministry of Labour**
     - www.labour.gov.on.ca
   - **Deciding whether to return to work - BabyCenter Canada**
     - www.babycenter.ca/537542

3. **Work Maternity Leave**
   - HowStuffWorks.com/MaternityLeave
   - MaternityLeaveInfo.com
   - Maternity leave from work
     - WorkingMother.com
   - Maternity Leave Jobs
     - ca.indi.../Maternity-Leave

Search for job postings - Find your new job today. Indeed?
See your ad here.
Yahoo searches:

- Support for mothers returning to work post maternity leave
- Maternity leave: Tips for returning to work - Mayo Clinic
- Returning to Work after Maternity Leave - Employee Rights, Advice...
- Returning to Work - Essentials for Working Moms Returning to Work
- Returning to Work After Maternity Leave - Working Moms Against...
Your pregnancy rights in Canada - BabyCenter Canada
www.babycenter.ca/s537568	Cached
How you should be treated at work while pregnant is pretty standard across Canada. What are your pregnancy ... your maternity leave ... returning to work this past ... Employment Standards I Employment Standards I Maternity Leave
www.gov.mb.ca ... Labour I Employment Standards
Maternity leave gives expectant mothers the ... dates employees were unable to work because of the pregnancy in the 17 ... returning to work ...

Checklist of Return to Work Forms - About
workingmoms.about.com ... Sample Letters for Working Moms
... they handled the end of maternity leave. You return to work letter can be as simple ... Moms Returning to Work: ... Support for Working Moms Planning Maternity Leave.

Pregnancy and Parental Leave | Ministry of Labour
www.labour.gov.on.ca ... Publications | Guide
Pregnancy Leave | Parental Leave | Rights for Employees Taking Pregnancy and Parental Leaves. Pregnant employees have the right to take pregnancy leave of up to 17 ... Deciding whether to return to work - BabyCenter Canada
www.babycenter.ca/s537542	Cached
Deciding whether to return to work, ... the decision concerning returning to work or staying at home with ... at home after maternity and parental leave, ...

Maternity benefits and breastfeeding - INFACT Canada Home Page ...
www.infactcanada.ca/Newsletter_Fall_2006_Pg01.htm	Cached
Maternity benefits and breastfeeding. ... Canada’s maternity benefits for mothers returning to the workplace rank ... Canada’s parental leave benefits ...

Statutory Maternity Leave: returning to work | nidirect
www.nidirect.gov.uk ... Work and families
Find out about your rights when you return to work from maternity leave and what to ... Maternity Leave: returning to work, ... you as a breastfeeding mother or ...

Returning to Work after Maternity Leave - Employee Rights, Advice...
Appendix E
WORK-LIFE BALANCE

- Maternity Leave Jobs | ca.indeed.com
  - ca.indeed.com/Maternity-Leave
    - 409 Reviews
    - Search for job postings - Find your new job today. Indeed?
      - Déposez votre CV
      - Get Jobs by Email
      - Most Popular Searches
      - Post Your Resume

- Returning To Work - Search for Returning To Work.
  - About.com/Returning To Work

- Maternity leave from work - Find Maternity Leave From Work
  - WorkingMother.com
    - Find Maternity Leave From Work: Giving Working Moms Advice & Ideas.

  - Are you looking for?
    - Support Groups
    - New Mother Support
    - Manic.mom
    - Family Support
    - Single Mother
    - Single Mother Support Groups
    - Young Mothers Support
    - Mothers Help

- Your pregnancy rights in Canada - BabyCenter Canada
  - www.babycenter.ca/037668
    - How you should be treated at work while pregnant is pretty standard across Canada. What are your pregnancy ... from the parental leave you’re ... if you return to work.

- Employment Standards | Employment Standards | Maternity Leave
  - www.gov.mb.ca/.../standards/doc.maternity-leave.fact
    - What is the difference between maternity leave and parental ... mothers are still entitled to maternity leave if they ... to return to work after a leave, ...

- Statutory Maternity Leave: returning to work | nidirect
  - www.nidirect.gov.uk/.../maternity-leave-returning-to-work
    - Find out about your rights when you return to work from maternity leave and what to do ... you have returned to work.
Exploring Options

In some cases, the job you had before a maternity, parental or adoption leave may no longer be the best fit for you, your baby, and your family. If returning to your previous job does not feel right, consider your options to make your work enjoyable and manageable:

Discuss your work schedule

• Think about your schedule, taking into consideration childcare logistics, travel time and unplanned time off (for example, time needed to tend to a sick child).

• Consider flexible hours, part-time work, working from home, job sharing and/or a gradual return to work.

• Talk to your employer about flexible work hours that fit with your family’s needs and make it possible for you to fulfill your work responsibilities.

• If you have an irregular schedule, such as shift work, see how you can adjust it to keep your child’s schedule as regular as possible.

• If possible, look at ways to reduce your travel time by moving, changing jobs or telecommuting (working from home, at least some days).

Change jobs or consider new opportunities

• Seek help through community-based employment services that offer career counselling, resume help, interview preparation and access to computers, internet and fax machines.

• Go to websites that offer information about employment and education services. You can search the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities of Ontario website to find out about employment and education services at: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/tcu/search.html.

• Use the Employment Ontario Network to receive information and referral services in a variety of languages by calling toll-free 1-800-387-5656 or visiting www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/tcu/etlanding.html.

• Consider running a small business out of your home.
Choosing Childcare Services

When you return to work, you will need to put your child in someone else’s care. This can be difficult, especially at the beginning.

It may be helpful to know that:

- It is normal for your child to prefer staying with you rather than going to childcare. Your role is to make the experience a positive one and to let your child know that you will come back.

- You need to have confidence in your childcare provider. Your child will feel good about going to childcare if you feel good about your decision. If you are acting concerned, your child may sense your anxiety and that will add to their insecurity.

- Childcare can play a positive role in your child’s development. The quality of the care is the most important contributing factor.

What is quality childcare? Licensed childcare in Ontario is regulated by the Day Nurseries Act and may be based in a centre (daycare) or in a home. Informal (unlicensed) childcare arrangements can also be made through a friend, neighbour or relative. A license is not required if there are no more than five children under the age of ten, in addition to the caregiver’s own children.
Appendix G

List of possible questions to ask potential childcare providers:

1. When do you start accepting applications? Is there a waiting list?
2. What is the adult to child ratio? What ages are the other children?
3. What are you hours? What is the flexibility with pick-up and drop-off times? Is there an added cost for being late?
4. How long have you been in business? What type of experience do you have?
5. What type of training or certification do you have?
6. Do you have first aid training?
7. What spaces in the building/house will the children be using?
8. Is smoking permitted in the building or outside in play areas?
9. What happens during a typical day/week?
10. What is a typical day in meals?
11. What are your methods of discipline?
12. How do you comfort children?
13. How often are the television and/or other electronic devices used?
14. What supplies do you provide and what do you expect us to provide? I.e.
   Diapers, wipes, food, toys, bottles
15. What is the alternative plan if the childcare provider is ill?
16. For what holidays is the facility closed?
17. What is the cost? Is there a cost when the provider is on holidays or when the children are away? A cancellation policy?
18. A list of references.
19. Are you open to a progressive transition when childcare begins? I.e. short amounts of time at first, adding time each day
20. Do you encourage parent visits?
21. How do you prefer to communicate with parents?
22. What is your policy on the use of social media? (I.e. pictures on Facebook)
23. Are you open to potty training? If so what methods do you use?
24. How will you be transporting my child(ren) for activities outside of the facility.
25. Is there an immunization policy?
26. What is your policy on administering medication?
27. How often are the toys cleaned and replaced?
28. When will the children be left unattended?
29. What is your release policy for pick-up by someone other than the parents?
30. Do you receive personal visits from people that are not associated with the childcare facility?

Sources: Best Start, Baby Center
Appendix H

Websites and links

**Government and health services:**

- Choosing child care
  

- Separation anxiety
  

- Maternity leave and parental leave in Alberta
  

- Best Start: Returning to work after baby
  

- Mayo Clinic: Tips for returning to work
  

- Parent Link Centres in Alberta
  

- Search: Family resource centre Edmonton to find a centre near you

**Blogs:**

- scarymommy.com
- workingmomsagainstguilt.com
- parents.com
- modernmom.com
- babycenter.ca
- askbaby.com