

A vintage typewriter is shown from a high-angle perspective. A sheet of white paper is inserted into the carriage, with the words "Notes on the Profession" typed in a black, monospaced font. The paper is slightly tilted. The typewriter's carriage is visible, with the name "Joseph F. Murphy" printed on it. The keyboard is partially visible in the foreground. A large, fluffy, light-brown stuffed rabbit is positioned in the lower right corner, its head and ears visible. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Notes  
on the  
Profession

Joseph F. Murphy

Foreword by Michelle D. Young, Executive Director

University Council for Educational Administration

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# NOTES ON THE PROFESSION

Joseph F. Murphy

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The University Council for Educational Administration is a consortium of higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children. We fulfill this purpose by:



- promoting, sponsoring, and disseminating research on the essential problems of schooling and leadership practice;
- improving the preparation and professional development of educational leaders and professors; and
- positively influencing local, state, and national educational policy.



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## FOREWORD

Michelle D. Young  
UCEA Executive Director

Joe Murphy is a household name, at least in my house. My husband, Derek, recently asked what I was working on and I replied that it was a foreword for Joe's monograph. Derek's response: "What is Professor Murphy up to now?" As a young professor, I intellectually sparred with some of Joe's ideas concerning the intellectual core of educational leadership: should it be democratic community, school improvement, or social justice? For the two decades since that time, his scholarship and ideas have taken up court in my work on leadership preparation, research, and practice.

I have worked with Joe in multiple capacities over the years. As a doctoral student, I was his Division A graduate student representative along with Jay P. Scribner. Once I took the executive director position with UCEA, I was treated to biannual packages of yellow legal pads, filled to the brim with handwritten ideas for researching or changing our profession. Some of those ideas have become reality, such as the publication of the *Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders*, which I co-edited with Joe, Gary Crow, and Rodney Ogawa in 2008. Other ideas have made their way into this monograph.

The contents of this monograph will speak to a wide variety of educational leadership colleagues, including faculty, graduate students, alternative providers, practitioners, and critics. The spectrum is broad, from expansive issues such as the history of the profession to very specific issues like the EdD dissertation. Some are likely to be quite surprised (both positively and negatively) by some of his opinions and the questions he raises; others will find the pushing and questioning familiar and may even recognize themselves in the conversations he evokes.

Without question, Joe is an ideas man. Yes, he has written and published a multitude of books, chapters, and journal articles on a wide variety of topics. But what I find most compelling about Joe is his untiring ability to develop, share, test, redevelop, and reintroduce ideas. Some of his ideas, as he shares in this monograph, have been more popular or acceptable than others, and some have "stuck" more successfully in the imaginations of our colleagues. Regardless, Joe travels on, building his arguments, refining ideas, developing new connections, and sharing his thoughts in a variety of outlets. Without a doubt, he would welcome the opportunity to talk with you about the ideas captured in this monograph and elsewhere.

For some readers, the cover of this monograph might be perplexing. Is that a bunny and a typewriter? Well, yes, it is a stuffed bunny rabbit sitting in front of an antique typewriter. You should ask Joe for the story behind it (and read Chapter 9).

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Michelle D. Young is the executive director of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) and a Professor of Leadership at the University of Virginia. Young's scholarship focuses on supporting effective, research-based educational policy and leadership development to achieve equitable and quality experiences for all students and the adults who learn and work in schools. Young's work has significantly increased the focus of education research on leadership preparation and brought that research to bear on the work of those who prepare educational leaders.





**PART 1**  
**ESSENTIAL PROBLEMS IN THE PROFESSORiate**



## Chapter 1

### Questions About the Profession: Norms and Faith

At the end of my first year as a professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois, I published an article entitled, somewhat unimaginatively, “Notes from a First-Year Professor.” The objective was to compare university culture and norms with those in play in the world of teaching and school leadership from which I had come, understanding the limitations of a single perspective. It was not intended to be a critique so much as a voyage of understanding for myself, but with the hope that it could be of assistance to others as well. I concluded that universities were different from schools in a number of important ways (e.g., think “time”).

Thirty years later I turn back to the business of the professoriate, at least as understood during my time in colleges of education. My questions and insights are more fundamental than those of 1985. They still focus on the values and norms that mark my life in the professoriate, a culture that continues to feel peculiar. Yet one that is ferociously guarded and maintained. Almost all of my efforts to discuss these issues are met with these responses: withdrawal, justification, and explaining away the questions. Almost never are they met with the response one would expect from the professoriate, in other words, discussion and debate. From colleagues who revel in robust discussion and analysis, such responses add to my concerns. I note again that my understanding is drawn from the eyes of one, but, I believe, eyes with a good deal of contextual perspective.

One matter that has regularly troubled me is the cherished belief in the power of formal peer review. I do not include here the process of securing collegial feedback on one’s work, whether in incipient or written form. I have earned my bonafides in this area, both as author and reviewer. I also have been involved with an abundant number of tenure and review cases from both the faculty

and administrative side of the process in which formal peer review of written work holds high ground in the promotion review process. So I have seen a good deal of the formal peer review process of scholarship in written form. It carries with it an aura of fundamental goodness that routinely perplexes me. It is an article of almost religious faith that “peer review” makes everything better—grants, publications, university investments in people, and so forth. Yet when I have asked for evidence, another cherished norm, that this is indeed a sustainable belief, I have never been given a satisfactory answer. When we progress at all, we move into tautologies. Most of the time, there is simply exasperation or worse—the demand that I produce a better system. It is also not unusual for my sanity or my legitimate membership in the profession to be questioned.

It does not seem unreasonable that a business that honors inquiry and evidence as cardinal values take the time to investigate whether formal peer review is as sturdy an architectural underpinning as the profession holds it to be. My own assessment is that it is not. More problematic, my “sense” is that it is unhelpful a good deal of the time. That is, formal peer review does not improve work. It is a blunt tool, often handed to colleagues with a need to chisel the world around them to confirm their own scholarly views. Often, I have seen it used to score points or to bolster the status quo. My question does not imply that formal peer review is without value. It is the universal and untested claim that it works well that seems troublesome. When I ask journal editors to conduct scientific studies of prereview and revised manuscripts to determine which are actually stronger, the conversations end. (And yes, I am aware of the irony of methodology to conduct such reviews.) Is it not possible to track higher scoring grant reviews from others and see which pro-



duced more important fundings? Likewise, with tenure reviews?

The publication norms, in addition to formal peer review, have always seemed peculiar. At the top of the list here is the norm of providing journals with monopoly powers. The idea of laboring on a piece of work (uncommissioned) for an extended period of time and then being unable to market the product seems against the grain of the way business should be done and generally is elsewhere. My patient colleagues take great pains to explain that first, this is an essential beam in the infrastructure of our business and second, that the world as we know it will collapse absent this keystone norm. At the risk of overgeneralization, monopolies generally fail to advantage users. When they do, those advantages generally come at a cost in terms of service. We all have stories to tell here. My overall assessment is that a system as critical as moving scholarship into public view that relies upon the kindness of reviewers and editors is less than ideal. And, of course, we are drawn back to the keystone role of peer review in the publication process. In addition to subjecting the peer review process to a good deal more empirical scrutiny, I think it worthwhile to test publication absent the review process. That is, allow assessments to be drawn on the backend of quality, not the input side of the quality equation. Perhaps we could publish half the submissions to a journal with no review and assess the impact of these vis-à-vis articles that successfully navigate the review process. More appropriately, we could publish all rejected pieces and all accepted pieces and track their influence over an extended period of time. Contrary to what my colleagues tell me, I don't think the world would unravel if we test this. My own guess is that we might be surprised by the data.

Two other dimensions of the profession seem worth opening to additional analysis. These are complex institutional-professional conditions or norms. The first is faculty governance, another hallmark value that I have struggled to hold in the same high regard as my colleagues. More criti-

cally, I wonder about its place in the modern university. In the universities in which I have worked, it is taken very seriously by faculty and their colleagues who have moved into administration. There is an authentic respect for a legitimate accommodation to faculty perspectives and voice. I have no disagreement with the position of workers helping drive the organizations in which they work. I also have developed a good deal of understanding about its importance and history in the business of higher education. My questions deal with the possibility that alternative arrangements might be more productive in the current world of higher education, questions that are, from my perspective, too easily dismissed. I wonder, for example, about whether a reasonable method to run an organization is routinely to place people well versed to do one job especially well (i.e., scholarship broadly defined) into management positions for which they often (generally) have no training. I might add to that concern by noting that the rules of the game for success in universities are being dramatically rewritten in ways that at least open the door of legitimacy to alternative operational methods. I do not mean to be naïve here. Having leaders who do not have a grasp on the core technology of the business is a troubling perspective. On the other hand, simply following the road we have been pursuing without consideration of alternative, and perhaps necessary, pathways does not seem wise.

Finally, there is the issue of tenure, although I have never been comfortable or successful in untangling the professional and organizational aspects of this arrangement. When I was working in the K-12 section, it felt mostly like an organizational matter. At the university, it seems to be much more of a combination of the two, with a nod to professionalism. I understand the lifetime commitment to faculty, although I must admit to being surprised at how much of a one-way relationship it is. One party signs on for the long haul while the other is free to jump ship if more attractive opportunities surface. It also, by way of return to the second theme of the article, seems peculiar

that professors have market control of their careers but not of their work.

As with some of the other central planks of the scaffolding for higher education, I wonder about the viability of this arrangement. My sense is that we have run out of fingers to plug this dyke.

But my questioning runs deeper. Without dishonoring the rationale for this protection and willful acknowledgement of the mischief that markets will

infuse into universities, I cannot push aside the question: Why us? Why do we deserve this unique gift? Would it not be quite beneficial for those in other lines of employment, professionals and nonprofessionals alike? Perhaps we do occupy a special place here, but I am not able to marshal much evidence to support this position. Given the advantaged position we already enjoy on the economic and social landscape of society, it seems to me to be a question that merits examination.

## Chapter 2

### Pray to Our Gods: The Marginalization of Practice in Departments of Leadership and Policy

The purpose of this brief is to advance the argument that departments of school leadership and policy maintain perspectives that are dysfunctional to the practice arm of the profession. The separation of the academy from practice, and vice versa, is not a new theme in school administration (Bridges, 1977). The objective here is to provide a deeper understanding of this divide by examining norms and proclivities on the university side of a quite frayed relationship. In short, the narrative is not one of separation but marginalization.

The rationale for the essay is fairly straightforward. It seems that we have been engaged in some inadequate doctoring over the last 40 years, prescribing an array of solutions with little understanding of the dynamics of the problem. Not surprisingly, the traditional ways we have attempted to address this gap (e.g., “the bridge between theory and practice”) have not provided much utility. Finally, I believe that actors in the chronicle from the university bear a special obligation to address this problem. All of these issues are explored below.

Let me begin by suggesting positive motivations for this brief. The aim is not to provide another screed on the significant disconnects among the four sets of sometimes interchangeable actors in the schooling play—academics, policy makers, developers, and practitioners. Let me also be clear that I am well aware that rents in the professional fabric have been made by others besides professors. That is an essay for another day. It also should be acknowledged that leadership and policy departments do some wonderful things for practitioners. That too is a topic for another day. Neither of these latter points gainsays the fact that a good deal of culpability for the generally subtle

but nonetheless robust marginalization of practice rests with us.

My third point can be addressed quickly, so let us begin there. Why do we have a special obligation to get after this problem? The most important answer, as I show below, is that we caused most of it and therefore bear a heightened sense of responsibility in the matter. I also arrive at this conclusion because we occupy a privileged position in the story. For all of the gratuitous condemnations of universities, we remain the big dog in the ring. I have yet to see a colleague from the other three sectors of the profession, even our toughest critics, feel anything but delight when they are provided university status in some form (e.g., adjunct professor). They, to a person, consider it an honor. They carry it on their résumés with some pride. On the other hand, I have been in the business a long time, and I have never heard of a professor listed as an adjunct or honorary member of a superintendent’s cabinet or any such related activity. Why do you imagine that is? Now on to the essential critiques.

#### Questions About the Emperor’s Robes

Let us start with some historical analysis (see especially Campbell, Fleming, Newell, & Bennion, 1987; T. Culbertson, 1995; Griffiths, 1959; Murphy, 1992). Departments of policy and leadership were practice-anchored places before the onslaught of the theory movement in the 1950s and 1960s. As with all attempts to overthrow one regime (practice) with another (theory), two lines of attack were laid out. The first, positively grounded, preached the benefits that would accrue to the profession if “science,” in

this case theory, assumed the leading role in the schooling play. The second, negatively anchored, laid down a withering line of fire against the idea of keeping practice (e.g., professional judgment, naked empiricism, and war stories) as the star of the production, along with the fundamental, but rarely directly stated, position that “A” would need to die for “B” to flourish. The result of all this, at least in departments of leadership and policy, is that the field turned increasingly to the social sciences, first sociology, then political science, more recently to anthropology, and now to economics, to strengthen the profession writ large. In the process, Dewey’s essential theme that educational practice provides the subject matter to shape inquiry and action was forgotten (nice interpretation) or dismissed (a harsher view).

Later, of course, empiricists would turn a skeptical eye toward (nice interpretation) or actively reject (a harsher view) the new theory gods. Again a double line of attack was set in motion, the benefits of pushing new and better science (i.e., evidence) onto the school policy and leadership stage and an elucidation of the limitations of “mere theory” to direct action. If social science theorists had failed to save the profession (which, of course, they had), more authentic scientists would be up to the task.

So what was the outcome of these struggles and transformations? Some very useful things for sure. One casualty, however, was a place for practice in the university home. Let us look at this assertion through some of the logic we have built up over the years. Perhaps our favorite is “the bridge between theory and practice.” An objective analysis of the idea conveys some essential insights, I believe. First, the traffic on this bridge was and is always supposed to flow from left to right. In 35 years of work in the profession, I have never once heard anyone talk about the bridge between practice and theory. Second, the concept explicitly acknowledges (and honors) the separation of practice from the academy. By definition, it suggests that someone is to construct a bridge to facilitate exchange. The reality is, of course, that

the bridge has never been built. Worse, if by some good fortune it were constructed, assessment of the influence of theory on the work of practitioners leads me to conclude that there would be almost no traffic on the structure (Griffiths, 1988; Hills, 1975; Murphy, 1992), except for the occasional student in our graduate programs. It is an amazingly dysfunctional metaphor by which to steer a profession, and one that marginalizes practice and practitioners.

Moving along, let us surface another of our core ideas, “the scholar practitioner.” A little deconstruction work here is useful as well. The cardinal message is quite clear: Practitioners need to look and act like us, with the sequela that they will be better off for the transformation. I realize that a sample of one has its problems, but for what it is worth I have a long history in the university and I have never had a professor assume the mantle of “practitioner scholar” or even seen such an idea in print. Words carry meaning, and this phrase speaks directly to the ancillary role of practice in universities.

We could pursue more examples. The common refrain that we are preparing “critical consumers of research” comes to mind. And, of course, “research” as we know it occupies the high ground here as well. Let us stop for a moment and peer at the currently popular concept, “evidence-based [fill in the blank].” What lays behind this powerful and appealing idea? Quite simply this: Some evidence is valued; other evidence is not (nice interpretation) or is denigrated (a harsher view). It does not take too much effort to determine whose evidence holds the place of honor and whose does not.

The point of all this is that we have built and continue to add additions to the professional house with considerably more emphasis on us and considerably less emphasis on practice than should be the case. We also have woven a tapestry from quite distorted logic to cloak ourselves from the judgment that we have done so (nice interpretation) or that we are right anyway (harsher view).

The point is not that the old science or the new science should be discarded. However, if they are not nested in the culture of practice and the work of practitioners, rather than our culture, they will have scant likelihood of accomplishing what we assert we want.

Take the “preparing critical consumers of research” nostrum we examined above. Go into the first 50 schools you find (where the principal is not currently a graduate school student) and ask the principals to name the last research article (as defined by us) that they read. My guess is that when we sum our answers we would be embarrassed into jettisoning this and related concepts and what they stand for.

Look at the “evidence-based practice” construct. It is not that the evidence that we generate is unimportant. But it certainly is not the chief god to those in practice. Many decisions in schools will never be made on the basis of scientific evidence. And even when it is available, it may not hold the top spot in the full consortium of evidence. Trying to beat people into accepting our gods is not a good strategy. The issue is not to continue to marginalize “evidence” as seen by others. We need to start with an examination of our own impoverished understanding of evidence before we proselytize others. We then need to help practitioners fit “scientific evidence” into their much broader array of what counts as evidence, a task we on the top of the pyramid have forgotten or chosen to ignore.

At the risk of being booted from the academy, let me suggest practitioners have plenty of evidence and much of it is incredibly powerful. “Intuitive knowledge” and “speculative analysis” often will rival more “scientific evidence.” So too will values. So too at times will “stories” and, yes, even “anecdotes,” a fact well known to colleagues shaping policy in special education. There is a spectrum of legitimate types of evidence, some of which feel more authentic to colleagues in practice. Pretending that we have a monopoly on evidence is not only incorrect but also marginalizes practice. It

almost guarantees that our efforts will produce inert material. Using ideas from colleagues in teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), we need much greater focus on evidence *in practice* and evidence *of practice*, with some dialing back on evidence *for practice*. We also need to be able to situate “scientific evidence” in the ways data exist in schools.

### The Sun Revolves Around the Earth

We also have marginalized practice and continue to do so by routinely privileging university culture over the culture of practice. In the face of a good deal of evidence to the contrary, we hold steadfast to the notion that the earth is the center of the universe. Begin with an examination of the “center of gravity” in our programs. The core scaffolding has been, is now, and looks as if it will remain perpetually the academic disciplines. Why is this? Because practitioner colleagues are calling out for such a framework? Because of the long and successful track record of its positive impact on the quality of leadership in schools? I do not believe answers are to be found here. We feature disciplines because they are what we know and who we are, or who we would like to think we are, not because they have any established linkages with the needs and interests of practitioner colleagues.

We have already reported on the requirement for everyone to worship our data gods, not those from practice. And since we control what gods are supposed to look like, we are untroubled by this fact. It feels and looks right seen from the university hilltop. One need look no further than the “typical” doctoral program for future school leaders to assess this claim. First, we offer a series of “methods” courses carved from psychology and anthropology. Much of this bears limited (nice interpretation) to little (harsher view) relationship to the “methods” required to run a school. But since the sun revolves around the earth, we tend not to trouble ourselves about this. We then culminate this oddity with a major assignment that is generally tangentially linked to the world of practice and

is rarely worth the time and effort required for the undertaking. But of course this assignment fits quite comfortably with the work that we do. And we do this because we are ascendant. We are more concerned with integrity (nice interpretation) or appearances (harsher view) of our world than with requirements of the world of practice. In the process, we have become dispensers of less-than-useful knowledge and defenders of a system that brutalizes practitioners who cannot master unneeded tools in the service of a largely useless assignment. And our “conversations” around these “failures” are sometimes less than charitable and always comfortably assign blame to the victims. For over 30 years, I routinely have asked why we do this. I have never received an answer that was not either a full-blown falsehood (e.g., so they can read research articles critically) or platitudes unworthy of professors (e.g., it helps them lead more effectively).

It gets worse, however. All of the above is not neutral. Disrespect sometimes creeps into the narrative. Let us return to evidence-based action and data. I have had many colleagues pulling their hair out over the years because their students are in a “quest for confirming evidence,” as opposed to the search for and appropriate use of “scientific evidence.” If the culture of practice were understood, my exasperated colleagues would realize that data in schools are quite often the search for confirming evidence, evidence to support chosen paths of change. This does not make it good. But simply “enlightening” or “browbeating” practitioners into using evidence more appropriately will not work for the profession writ large. We need to help colleagues nest our evidence into their evidence in ways that ensure action. When we dismiss their evidence as unworthy, this becomes impossible. For example, it is not especially difficult to let stories and anecdotes carry evidence-based data to great effect.

The same point holds for a variety of our favorite scientific ideas. Take “generalizability.” The basis for establishing meaning here is different in schools than in universities, not better or worse

but different. If we desire to have colleagues in practice incorporate the power of scientific generalizability, we would do well not to pretend (often with some smugness) that field-based understandings of generalizability are tragically flawed and that the people there should convert to our religion. We would be better off trying to understand how they think about generalizability (and other tools) and then find methods to bring the ideas into alignment for school improvement.

Other examples of mostly defenseless activity in universities also flow from privileging academic culture. Here are a few that wear laurels in our world but seem quite wrongheaded in the culture of practice: the focus on (a) a curriculum of questions over answers (practitioners need answers), (b) dialogue and discussion over action (the dynamic of practice is action), (c) the heavy emphasis on writing over interpersonal skills (80% of a principal’s time is spent in interpersonal exchanges; if he or she wrote anything longer than two pages in a year it would be noteworthy), and (d) thinking over “mere technical work” (much of the job is technical in nature). No, I am not arguing that dialogue and thinking are poor skills for practitioner peers to have. What I do contend, however, is that the marginalization of practice culture, the mistaken belief that the sun revolves around the earth, has pushed us to the far left side on all of these (and related issues).

### **Cause for Humility**

Don Schula, the iconic coach of the Miami Dolphins, tells a wonderful story of a time he and his wife went to watch a movie in a very small New England town. As they entered, the small group gathered broke into applause. Of course, Schula assumed it was on his behalf. Turns out that the theater would only show the movie if nine people were in the audience. He and his wife had just ensured that those gathered would indeed be able to see their film, and they were pretty happy about the fact. I think we could learn from the story. When I review the chronicle of the most important

work in the profession over the last 40 years, I believe it merits appreciation. On the other hand, we would be wise not to spend too much time patting ourselves on the back or preening for colleagues in policy, practice, and development. What have we really told colleagues in these domains of the profession? Something along these lines I think:

- Good employees matter; hire them rather than weak ones.
- Coming to work is valuable.
- If you get to know someone and care about them, you are more likely to be able to help them.
- It helps at the start to know where you want to go and to take stock of the trip from time to time.
- If you invest more time and labor (i.e., you work harder), you get more than if you do not.
- Good leaders are better than mediocre or poor leaders.
- Things that are implemented well work better than those that are not.
- You are wise to take context into consideration when making decisions and taking action.

Using “state-of-the-art” tools, we rediscover these conclusions every decade or so. We then dress them up in new garments and assume credit for new insights that look a good deal like the old insights. More importantly, they match pretty closely what practitioner colleagues have deduced to be the case using much less sophisticated tools than the ones we prize. Not that our work is not impor-

tant, but we really could be a bit more humble about our contributions than I often detect to be the case.

For all of our sophistication, we also marginalize practice when we follow pathways that run counter to our own preachings. We do a lot of selling based on less-than-convincing (nice interpretation) or illusionary (harsher view) evidence. I maintain a portfolio of these truths in the “middle brain research institute,” ideas such as learning styles and “adult” development. Equally important, at many universities, on a multitude of commissions, and with assorted associations I have been in thousands of meetings. A generous assessment is that I could count on two hands and one foot all the decisions made on the basis of evidence-based research. Or even cases where evidence-based research played an important if not starring role. It is often the “story” or the “anecdote” (e.g., “My wife is a fourth-grade teacher and she tells me that ...”) that moves people to decide issues on the table. We trample on our own banner. Poor modeling indeed.

There is more to be said, of course. But the goal here is not to create an encyclopedia of problems. It is, rather, to show that the real issue here is not the separation of the academy and practice but the marginalization of the latter by the former. I understand that there is no meanspiritedness involved. But that does not alter the outcome. We cannot be successful as a profession building with the blueprints we have created. The mythical bridge between theory and practice will likely never be built. Conversion will not carry us far either. We need to get the earth into better alignment with the sun.

## Chapter 3

### Education Administration 75 Years Out: Avenues for Improvement

When we look across the academic arm of the profession of school leadership, I believe that we are entitled to a fair measure of satisfaction. Fifty years ago, we were still stumbling about attempting to figure out what the field of school leadership was, or should be. The North Star, the theory movement, we chose to follow turned out to be considerably less luminous than colleagues at the time believed (Griffiths, 1988). We drifted about for a few decades. However, over the last quarter of a century we have gravitated, quite appropriately I would argue, to (a) a much deeper focus on students and their learning; (b) a much enriched understanding that the most helpful architecture for education is based in powerful notions of community; and (c) a much more robust and tangible sense of commitment to our children, especially to those who have been allowed (or encouraged) to fail in the past.

There are, however, significant challenges that remain to be addressed in the academic domain of school administration, some left over from our foundation and a few that we have created anew as we progressed. My objective here is to discuss three of the most important of these challenges: (a) the ahistorical nature of scholarship in and an inadequate understanding of the development of our field of study (a new challenge), (b) a mis-specification of the core model of who we are (a new challenge), and (c) an inappropriate grasp of the academic disciplines in the academic arm of the profession (a recurring challenge).

Let me begin by acknowledging that these are the most critical issues as seen by me. Others may be more sanguine about the state of affairs in these areas. Still others may see different challenges. I have friends who I am quite convinced will consider discussion on these matters as unnecessary, unscientific (i.e., nonempirical), or poorly grounded ramblings. It would, of course, be fool-

ish to construct this essay the way I have chosen if I did not believe the points discussed are correct. But almost equally important, I see our 75th (roughly) anniversary right in front of us. I suggest that it provides a good marker for us to take serious stock of who we are and where we should direct our efforts for the next stage of professional work in school administration.

#### Ahistorical Perspectives: The Missing Lens

We pay little attention to the historical roots and the growth of the profession. We are without an historical ethnography. As a consequence, we often have impoverished understandings of the issues we address and the challenges we confront. Three indicators of this reality can be teased out from the macro narrative. First, there is a near absence of historical analyses in educational administration in general. The grandfathers of the profession (there were no grandmothers) and their offspring did leave a small historical body of analysis, almost a bit of a legacy. However, none of these scholars were historians and few used the methodological tools of historians. Most of their writings are firsthand accounts of the world as it rushed past them, or had recently rushed past them. Even this work, however, is rarely referenced today. New scholarly efforts to expand these early pieces of scholarship and to fill in the spaces from their times to now are in very thin supply.

Second, there is a powerful strand of unnecessary reinvention prevalent in our profession, of colleagues starting from scratch and then telling us what we already know quite well. I do not refer here to replication studies or to work that adds bricks to the knowledge façade. Rather, I refer to the “discovery” on a fairly routine basis of what is already well established in the extant scholarly



literature. There are explanations for this reality as well, but these hardly gainsay the fact that such work is rarely needed.

Third, it is “peculiar” in most of the work in our field to see references to the seminal scholarship that defines the various domains. Equally troublesome is the routine failure of much of our work to be grounded upon the layers of sediment that cover these roots, an issue that returns us to the point immediately above. There are reasons for all three of these problems (e.g., the fact that we are a post-WWII invention), but they do not serve us well.

### **Misspecification of the Core Model of the Profession: The Cracked Lens**

For reasons that remain hazy, we continue to portray the full profession as a triangle, the famous portrait of “research, policy, and practice.” The problem is that this is a quite inadequate picture of the landscape, akin to seeing the world as flat. A fourth component is required to make a whole. Specifically, we need to add the core element of “development.” It is unusual at best for research to touch policy or practice. As is the case with leadership, the impact of scholarly work is nearly 100% indirect in nature; in other words, we need to acknowledge a fully mediated influence. Nearly everything in our world is mediated by the development arm of the profession. We need to be considerably more thoughtful to configure or model the profession as a diamond, with development occupying a quarter of the design. If we continue to fail to acknowledge this reality, we will continue to end up leaving most of our research on the table—or more accurately, in library.

### **Inappropriate Commitments to the Disciplines: The Clouded Lens**

This is not the venue to replay the battles of the 1950s and 1960s that placed the social science disciplines on the throne of the academic domain

of school administration. That is the reality of school administration, at least since the 1960s. Calls for displacement of the status quo routinely have been met with discussion, skepticism, or tokenism. So I will refrain from an assault on the Emerald City here. However, employing a more conservative approach, keeping disciplines front and center, some serious challenges can still be successfully addressed. First, we could ensure that the crown is shared and that the disciplines are yoked to practice, policy, and development in meaningful ways. School administration is not a discipline. It is an applied area of study and work that forages from others’ fields. This can be wise, assuming we move into useful pastures. The cloudiness here remains largely, however, because the “applied” label has been seriously tarnished, assuming a very limited role on the academic stage of school administration. In the process, we have elbowed genuine commitment to practice off of the stage, developing instead such banal concepts as “the bridge between theory and practice” to excuse our arrogance and sins.

Second, if we took the time to look across our history (see above!), at least since 1960 or so, we would see that educational administration is a serial friend of the disciplines. Over the last 50 years, we have hopped from one discipline to another in search of a framework to anchor the profession, sociology followed by political science followed by economics. It has not been the norm in the academy to coningle disciplines in the service of research.

Finally, without exacerbating the problem just noted, as we have rambled about the discipline landscape we have displayed a singular inability to find the disciplines that are most needed in school administration, psychology, and philosophy (with the exception of statistical methods). Without engendering the wrath of colleagues in many places, I believe it is safe to say that the disciplines we have featured in the academic wing of the profession have limited power to improve schools. The essential issue here is students in classrooms with their teachers struggling toward

learning. The answers for us, I would suggest, are to be found in the study of children and their development and in the work of how adults form trusting relationships with these young persons (Murphy & Torre, 2014). Perhaps in our episodic wanderings we will discover psychology and philosophy. That would be fortunate indeed. But even

if we do, we need to take advantage of the other lessons examined above. We need to blend the best of disciplines, to revalue the profession around practice, and to find authentic methods and strategies to braid the academic disciplines around practice.

## Chapter 4 A Disagreeable Colleague

He is a censorious personality,  
not especially distinguished for amiability of manners,  
distinctively inelegant  
He maintains a brilliant capacity for making himself disagreeable  
Unpliable by nature, profuse of annoyance,  
singular in arrogance

While he stands clear before his own conscience,  
to others his efforts are deeply enlisted in unproductive directions  
Scant of wisdom and overserved with data  
He wears the carapace of obstinacy  
He is endowed with the clarity of hopelessness  
and freighted with the dour ideology of rigor  
Using a compass suited only to himself  
he is serial provedore of meaningless critique

He displays intolerance for varied viewpoints,  
pounding noise into discussions  
He feasts on the carcass of righteousness  
employing the currency of anger

When dragged onto the field of actual endeavor  
he stands naked,  
his ideas springing from a single root out of dry ground  
his triumphs decidedly underwhelming

He stands outside the arch of human dignity,  
on the outskirts of influence  
He consistently falls below the demands of the occasion.

## Chapter 5

### Of Questionable Value: The EdD Dissertation—An Essay

For many years now, I have argued that the dissertation requirement for colleagues preparing for senior positions of leadership in the practice arm of the profession makes very little sense. Worse, it actually corrupts doctoral preparation for school and district leaders. In this essay, questions about the validity and appropriateness of the EdD dissertation are surfaced. The objective is to throw a rope into the quicksand of our illusions about the dissertation, to help us rethink this requirement in the portfolio of doctoral work for practitioner colleagues.

My critique extends to the entire EdD program of study. While the focus here is squarely on the dissertation dimension of those programs, some of the general criticism leaks into the narrative. This is not an empirical analysis, although many of my assertions are easily verifiable. The tools in use here are common sense, logic, and comparative analysis. To set the stage, here is my definition of the EdD dissertation: “Work that need not be done by those who should not be doing it.” It is a less-than-useful (softer interpretation) to tyrannical (harsher interpretation) obligation imposed on students by managers of the program caravan who should know better. The chronicle is presented in four sections below, all centered on the lack of validity for the assignment: ersatz uniqueness, program corruption, marginalization of practice, and absence of an appropriate ethic.

#### **Are We That Special?**

The essential question here is that if the dissertation is such an important instrument in the toolbox for educating practitioners, would we not expect the other professions to include it in their programs? A quick trip around any large university will reveal that they do not, not in human or veterinary medicine, not in business or law schools,

not in the dental school, and so forth. Education is the only “professional school” that includes this particular program requirement. So, why do we follow this singular strategy? Some scholars have devoted attention to this question over the years (J. A. Culbertson, 1988; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Murphy, 1992). The consensual answer is that it has more to do with promoting the academic credentials of colleges of education and the cherished badges of identity of its professors than it does with the needs and interests of the students in those colleges. The theme these analysts develop is that education colleges (and departments of school leadership) patterned themselves on models found in the arts and sciences rather than in the professions. This, of course, is a general problem that has produced a distorted framework for doctoral programs overall, but our attention here is devoted to the dissertation. We have dissertations because the arts and sciences have dissertations. The answer is almost as simple as that.

Now if we had the courage to admit this, that would be one thing—a wrong thing, for sure, but at least one we were willing to defend. But such courage is in short supply. And we have tricked ourselves into accepting a range of less-than-satisfactory (softer interpretations) or foolish (harsher interpretation) answers as legitimate. So let us begin again with another essential question. Does the EdD dissertation help colleagues be more effective practitioners? Of course, as with many important dimensions of our programs, we have no evidence that this is the case, so we have created an assorted variety of platitudes and a Niagara of verbiage to support our claim about the linkages here. Some of these are tautological in nature, justifications that assign blame for our own poor decisions to others (e.g., this is an important aspect of “doctoral work”; the graduate school

requires it). Many of these claims (softer interpretation) or nostrums (harsher assessment) pivot on the role of the dissertation in helping students learn in a general sense or lead more effectively. In essence, the dissertation is good for them. The point is not that these claims are false, but anemic. Anything can help people learn. Taking up a new sport or learning to write poetry, for example. My own assessment is that most practitioners would “learn to think” more effectively by learning to ski than they would developing a dissertation. The important question is how much capital for such a limited payoff should be invested? There is a considerable range of experiences that get us to the objective of helping students learn to learn and learn to lead much more productively than the dissertation.

If not of significant benefit to the individual (and we properly discount the ersatz prestige to departments and faculty), then perhaps the body of knowledge being generated through dissertations in our EdD programs is benefitting the profession of school leadership writ large. This is a standard argument for the dissertation; new deposits are being added to the vault of professional knowledge. The evidence here is decidedly underwhelming. I am aware of none beyond the exceptional case. The evidence that is pushed out is generally the result of corrupt accounting, scant of data and overserved by ideology. This is not a difficult assertion to confirm. Pick 100 EdD dissertations at random, say 10 per year for 10 years and see what, if any, contribution has been made to the knowledge base. At best, what you will find is that these dissertations are on the outskirts of influence.

So, if the dissertation is of marginal value to the individual and provides a less-than-credible harvest for the profession, it seems wise to rethink its place of honor in our programs. If we cast a broad gaze over the knowledge base of how people develop the art and craft of a profession, an array of more effective alternatives is available.

## Dissertation as Viral Infection

As is the case with its arts and science cousins, the social science disciplines, the dissertation exerts a penumbra of dysfunctional influence on the balance of learning opportunities in our EdD programs. It infects the curriculum. It reinforces the discipline-based planks that anchor EdD programs, planks that have a precarious fit with the field of practice. Even more troubling, it infuses a series of questionable methods courses into the curriculum. You need, the argument is advanced, these “methods” in order to undertake the scholarly assignment of completing a dissertation. In short, the delusion of the need for a dissertation leads to the illusionary corollary of the need for methods courses. The problem here is not with the importance of methods. It is that these are the methods of the academy, what academics need to do their work, not methods culled from the work of practice, or at least adapted and fit to that context.

So the upshot of all this is that we require a noticeable portion of the EdD program to be devoted to the completion of an assignment that provides a very thin form of nourishment for leaders. Together, these two distortions (i.e., the dissertation and accompanying methods courses) consume in the neighborhood of 30% of the entire EdD program. My assessment is that this is the high water mark of inappropriateness. I also believe that the cold air of a new world is beginning to blow over the profession. Surely it is time to address these relics of the past and cleanse the ancestral tapestry of doctoral programs for colleagues in practice.

## The Marginalization of Practice

Scholars for some time now have documented and explored the gap between the geography of administrative practice and the culture of universities (Bridges, 1977; Erickson, 1977; Goldhammer, 1983). Nowhere is our disregard (soft assessment) or disrespect (harsher view) more obvious

than in the context of the EdD dissertation. The flow of work here generally bears scant resemblance to the activity rhythms of school leaders. We have already noted the (generally prideful) misspecification of methods in EdD programs. Additional silliness in preparing leaders is widely on display in and around the dissertation as well. We would do well to remind ourselves the following:

1. The dissertation is about specialization and becoming an expert in a defined domain of learning; the people we are helping develop are generalists.
2. The dissertation honors writing, apprenticeship writing for a career of publication; the colleagues we are assisting rarely write (80% of the work is interpersonal exchange), and when they do, the writing bears very little resemblance to the academic writing in a dissertation.
3. The dissertation features the consumption of research articles and the conducting of an “original” piece of research; the students we are educating will rarely if ever read a research article (at least as defined by us) and almost surely will never conduct another research study in their careers.

It seems reasonable that we create learning opportunities with better fits to the world of practice than those found in dissertations. When we fail to do so, we marginalize practice.

### **A Question of Ethics**

One of the issues associated with the EdD dissertation that is largely (generous interpretation) or completely (harsher view) ignored in the literature is the matter of noncompleters, especially the All But Dissertation (ABD) colleagues. The impoverished nomenclature here alone (defining people by what they lack or their failures) is telling, is it not? There are a number of issues that merit attention. To begin, while I lack the firmness of numbers, it is accurate, I believe, to claim that the

pool of these “failures” is not insignificant. A fair number of our colleagues finish programs of study but are unable to complete the dissertation requirement. This is an opportune moment to remind ourselves that in nearly every other profession the relationship between finishing coursework and earning a degree is isomorphic. Only we seem to have been wise enough to add a massive requirement beyond the accumulation of necessary courses, a model that is completely foreign to learners based on 25 years or so of the previous schooling they have had.

Nearly every domain of the leadership profession (e.g., the finance scholars, social justice colleagues, school improvement analysts) holds that blaming young people for failure in school is wrongheaded. Yet a similar ethic of care is generally conspicuous by its absence when it comes to our failures, in other words, ABD colleagues. In all my time in the profession, I have never heard a university assume accountability for the failure of an EdD student to complete his or her degree. The idea of refunding at least the financial capital that these students have invested is completely off grid of consciousness. Almost always, the finger of blame is pointed directly at the student, with remarkably little self-analysis. My assessment is that this is morally suspect.

### **Conclusion**

The EdD program in educational leadership is in need of serious analysis across the board. We have too much of this good thing. We educate all the veterinarians in the United States in 29 schools, and there are as many of them as there are principals and superintendents. We graduate 44,000 attorneys a year from 201 law schools. We prepare all our medical doctors in 141 schools, and there are more than 8 times as many of them as there are of principals and superintendents. The EdD curriculum also leaves a good deal to be desired. Much of it is simply a rehash of what students received in their master’s coursework. Prac-

tice-anchored work in our doctoral programs is even less visible than in master's programs.

Perhaps most troubling though is our unthoughtful use of the dissertation to educate practitioners. It has produced marginal gains for individuals and for the profession writ large. There is remarkably little justification for its use. It is neither valid nor appropriate. It relies for support on miasma of

ideology. It amounts to little more than the hauling around of old habits for us and a crucible of hardship for many students. The capital invested by students and universities could be much better employed. It was an astonishing misjudgment for the profession to have chosen this pathway. The time is at hand to lean upon some courage and sweep loose from the old moorings.

## Chapter 6

### The Interment of Edd Disser

It was only a line in the paper. Dr. Edd Disser was to be buried today, in a pauper's grave in the charitable section of the municipal cemetery. No marker was to be placed.

I felt a peculiar need to attend. Closure perhaps to our long struggle over the years? Some notion of finality?

I did not expect a large crowd given the distasteful time before the trial and the subsequent plea bargain—events that pushed friends and supporters away, all quite taken aback by their own sins and the frailness of their own grip on the educational reins.

But the fact that I was the lone spectator was unexpected. It certainly would have surprised Edd Disser himself for we were ferocious adversaries. I had long considered him the seminal figure in an unseemly and fraudulent enterprise, one whose stench was scented over with the perfume of power and money. He, of course, had little use for me and grew exceedingly antagonistic over the years.

Still, that no one was present was a shock. After all, he was from the most noble of university families. His brothers and sisters ruled over all the sciences and the arts. Their forefathers, and their forefathers, and all of those before them had for nearly 1,000 years held similar roles. Not one of them was visible today, however. Given the damage the Edd had caused the family through the years I should, perhaps have been less surprised. Royalty's grasp is often more tenuous than we are led to believe I think.

But that not a single friend or ally was on hand was, I would suggest ungracious at best and cowardly at worst. After all, more than a few score of college presidents had courted Edd in the hope of

employing his bounty to enhance the status of their institutions and, of course, indirectly themselves. They knew full well that Edd could ensure them a seat at the table of doctoral granting institutions and they enticed him somewhat shamelessly. Entire PR departments were kept busy documenting the wooing process and the growing relationship. And all of this in spite of the fact that these leaders neither liked Edd nor held him in much regard.

Not one from the multitude of provosts and deans who had used their friendship with Edd to access his considerable wealth in the service of noneducational ends was present either. With the power of his imprimatur and the protection of his mantle, Edd had led many faculty members toward organizational respectability. But none of these beneficiaries wished to be seen graveside either.

After the cemetery staff had left, I walked to the fresh earth that covered Edd. I replayed the events of the last years that had ended Edd's position of influence and thought about how we had arrived at this end, one that would have seemed beyond probability as recent as a decade earlier.

Indeed, things were never quite as rosy as Edd and his supporters believed. A solitary voice here and there, now and then, continued to call attention to the unseen decay eating away at the foundations that supported Edd and his cartel. By and large, employing the pomp of academic righteousness, these reports were easy to dismiss. When on the rare occasion they were taken seriously, the cartel promised fixes and repairs to steady the vessel. Easily completed makeovers mostly, but well garbed. And nearly everyone was happy with the status quo, so it was best this way.

I suspect that Edd himself was the first to realize that the narrative was about to make a sharp turn,



although no one, least of all Edd, knew just how dramatic that shift would turn out to be.

Complaints about Edd began to surface with less caution. More people began to listen. His Achilles heel of irrelevance was growing more visible. While still on the top of the world, you could feel that Edd was becoming a bit uneasy. Rather than offering up the usual array of cosmetic changes (e.g., dropping the strict requirement of adherence to the five-chapter format) and appeals to the gods of routines (e.g., nonnegotiable constraints imposed by the graduate school), Edd and his friends began to reference more moderate ideas. Edd was going to create a more “professional” version of himself, an “alternative” Edd, if you will. It had a nice ring to it and was consumed by increasing numbers of universities with some relief. Life as it was could continue and standards, such as they were, would be held at all costs.

In retrospect, if we need to locate the point when fortunes started to change for Edd, I think it would be when those he enticed on his grand voyage and then abandoned with so little regard began to coalesce. For as long as anyone could remember, those who were denied entrance to the kingdom were told, and came to believe, that they, not Edd and his cartel, were responsible for their being cast aside. The brush of inadequacy was often applied—limited dedication, intellectual shortcoming, and so forth. At more charitable times, failures were allowed to pass as consequences of changing conditions—growing families, increasing work responsibilities, and so on. Generally, the discarded were too embarrassed to respond, simply putting the entire distasteful experience behind them. But no longer. By the turn of the new century, many of these casualties had begun find their voice,

The entire chain of events was surreal, and shockingly brief. It was in 2009 that Edd had been arrested. Racketeering and mail fraud were the dominant charges. And because Edd had shifted such a significant portion of his business to online platforms over the previous decades, he had opened himself to even greater prosecution. As the case against Edd was picking up increasing momentum, the defense, clearly worried, pressed for a plea bargain.

A deal was struck. Edd would be given probation and be placed under house arrest in the library, surrounded by the thousands of his offspring that lay unopened on the shelves. He was free to leave in the mornings to take care of personal affairs but was prohibited from going within 100 feet of any college or school of education. He was also forbidden from having any contact with graduate students.

He lingered longer than most thought he would, finally falling prey to an infection from the mold that inexorably crept across his offspring.

As I turned to leave his burial plot, I saw what looked to be a very young Edd running toward the grave site.

When he arrived, he placed some plastic flowers on the mound of earth and, hat in hand, mumbled some phrases that had no meaning to me. When he was finished, I inquired into his purpose there. Why, I am Dr. Disser’s son, he said, Capstone Disser.

I left less sanguine than when I arrived.



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**PART 2**  
**STORIES AND POEMS ABOUT SCHOOLS**

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## Chapter 7

### Notes of an Average Teacher

It was only a week or so before my first class that I realized how poorly prepared I was for the assignment I had accepted as my life's work. Exactly what was it that I was going to do with the 26 six- and seven-year-old children who would soon be in my emotional and pedagogical care? Through the inverted spyglass, I see now that a good part of the problem lay with my formal preparation. I had elected to attend one of our nation's elite institutions for a truncated program to learn the craft and science of teaching. While not a poor choice in the larger story of my life, I can honestly report that it did little to prepare me for the job of teaching. Too much of the science and too little of the art and craft, I am afraid. Another part of the looming challenge rested squarely with me, if truth be acknowledged. I was only 25 myself and lacking most of the accumulated wisdom of later life that could stand instead of formal learning. The opposite was the case with my sense of certainty, again a problem that age, at least in my case, would have addressed. The third aspect of the problem of inadequate preparation was collective. My guides and I subscribed to a view of school that bore scant relationship to the one in which I now found myself. In our view, children would handle most things. Here I was expected to be in charge.

I have become a much better teacher over the years, but with adults, not the very young children of that time. I am of the opinion that there would be transfer going backwards but there is no sure way to know. And while age has brought many gifts, limitations have surfaced as well. I am sure that I no longer possess the physical prowess to travel through life with 26 six- and seven-year-olds. There are times, however, that I wish that I could and would.

My family was odd to say the least, but normal in the quest for acknowledgment and success for

their children. Advancement for my father was inexorably linked to further education, so my decision to turn away from the pathway provided to attend one of the nation's leading business schools was poorly received. Teaching was seen as a lateral step at best, in any case not a move forward. It was not that my father was concerned with the accumulation of goods or rise in social status. No description of him could include such ideas. Rather, I believe that he was unable to understand desires and actions that could not be accommodated in his existing, and fixed, frameworks. He could at times mold ideas to fit his understanding, but he was largely uninterested in changing that faculty, at least in the years that I knew him as an equal. He made no effort to change my decision, yet the sense of confusion he felt was real. If there is any beauty in the story here it is that his disquiet was grounded in concern for me and bore no element of selfishness. Nor was it seen through the eyes of others, only through his own lens of perplexity.

The children helped me immensely. As individuals and as a collective, they opened new doors to understanding. They helped me learn what it meant to be a teacher and, more importantly, a person. Once I discovered their power, I became an even less-than-average teacher, at least in the short run. I discovered that they were quite capable of running their individual and collective activities with minimal guidance from me. This, of course, freed up even more time for observing and learning from them, all in all requiring considerably less effort undertaking the formal work that I had convinced myself early on would be necessary.

I think that the trip each class and I took together was full of life and generally of fun, although I suspect that we would receive less-than-satisfactory marks from the officials who knew the

business better than we did. Nor do I dismiss such assessments lightly, for these were children who were already in deficit, often severely so, in the struggle for success in life. I was often torn by the need to start filling their satchels with more tangible assets than joy. And I still fault myself for inadequacy in that regard. I often wonder where these children are now and if any fingerprints from our time together are visible, and if so, what is the nature of that residue.

Even then I could see and feel the forces that worked to convey to my children their inadequacies and failures, as well as their triumphs. It is not only that the latter were less available, I think, but they were of smaller moment in the development process. The former were weightier, possessing the power to carve pathways to second-class life; to instill acceptance of unfairness; and to define success and adequacy in incorrect, if not foolish, ways—but ways that nonetheless matter a great deal and worked to the disadvantage of my young charges.

During my time with these youngsters, from an adult perspective teaching was a solitary enterprise. It was rare to see colleagues, and when I did it was only for fleeting glimpses or in formal meetings in which we learned in ways that mirrored those we used in classes with our children. I was smart enough to be able to see the irony of this but failed to do so, or at least I have no recollection of being that clever at the time.

The memories I have of my peers largely belie the claims and disgruntlements of educational critics of the current era, although some of the counter-cultural critique of the time seemed on target. It is possible that my colleagues transformed themselves from the hallways, lunchroom, and public spaces when they moved into their classrooms, but it seems unlikely to me, so I take them for how they presented themselves. And being a less-than-gifted instructor myself and sharing no pedagogical space, I can report almost nothing about their teaching skills. On the interpersonal and support front, they were a remarkable group.

*Authentic* and *caring* are terms that seem appropriate. A small number viewed their work as a job. Most did not. All had dreams and plans for themselves and for their families, but they did not leave the needs and interests of their students at the schoolhouse door. They carried them back and forth from school to home in odd-shaped bundles and bags. And their inner eyes were witness to a continuously unfolding cineographic story of the young people they guided through life.

The roots for many of the most essential understandings in my life were planted during my time as a first-grade teacher and each can be traced to my students. I have grown to more fully see these gifts as I have grown older. And as other insights and understandings have failed to withstand the passage of time, the ones bestowed by my students glow even more brightly.

I live in a rich and wonderfully complex world now, but I hold as sacred the understanding of the importance of simplicity, of parsimony and eloquence, a gift from children too young to know or care about the wisdom they offered to those around them.

As I watched my young charges, mostly when I should have been teaching, I confess, I saw their remarkable ability to build groups of friendship, without the need for exclusiveness and the marginalization of others, a phenomenon of social interaction that I have almost never seen again. I am still troubled that this remarkable ability of young children is so quickly reshaped. There is, of course, the possibility that the clues of exclusion my children were demonstrating were too nuanced for me to see, or that I have added a bit of romanticism to the chronicle. But I do not find these explanations convincing. The narratives of community and inclusion are more robust and are gifts that I attempt to honor in my own actions.

For reasons it serves no larger purpose to dwell upon here, my childhood cannot be defined as a joyous time. My students were the ones who opened that door for me. They taught me about

the critical values of fun in the larger algorithm of life and in the magical play we call learning. It entails not simply a touch of sparkle and lightness but the forming of robust tethers to the work afoot, a thrilling ride, and the death of the clock.

For all of my advanced education, early in my career of teaching I discovered that I possessed an impoverished understanding of intelligence. It was the youngsters in my care who educated in this regard, providing unscripted insights that ran against the organizational norms in which I swam and counter to the wisdom of those who studied and advised on this topic. The intelligence of the senses was unknown to me. Nor did I know well the intelligence of the heart. Equally unnerving now is the knowledge of my inability to grasp the intelligence of life's physical labors. Fluid intelligence, the intelligence of understanding, lay largely fallow as well. The very idea that intelligence was mastery of the domains of schooling, reading, writing, and manipulating numbers was so deeply ingrained that it robbed me of sight. I had learned and come to accept a minimalist perspective on intelligence, one bound by logic and linearity. Over and over again, in profound and subtle ways, my students expanded and deepened the web of intelligence that I had carried with me to the school. Much of what they revealed came in the form of unseen threads that grew visible only as a new tapestry began to form before me. At other times the lessons were sharp, impossible for even the dense to overlook.

For all of the time I had spent in school and for the central place that organized religion played in my life, it is disturbing, in reflection, to acknowledge how little I knew of community when I first entered the classroom. Most of the elements of pastoral care lay fallow in those venues. While I did not lack for friends, the bonds there were awkward, the linkages of equals stumbling along in loose alliances. If there were adults stoking the fires of community, they were invisible to me then and remain so now in reflection. Part of the void can be traced to the dysfunctionality of my family, the need to attend to more pressing, more basic de-

mands. Much, I believe, rests at the feet of the Catholic faith and its influence on its educational system at the time. And, of course, some of the absence was locally crafted. I had learned and developed a proclivity to focus on the backrooms of community, to seal off linkages with others in a protective way, even when this necessitated leaving potential gains on the table. In short, before teaching my understanding here was impoverished at best.

My 6- and 7-year-old students opened the doors to community for me, or at least removed the padlocks to those doors, for if I am honest here, too much debris had accumulated for those doors to have flown open widely. As I observed my students, as noted above with much looking occurring during the hours I should have been teaching and the balance in the informal intervals of their time at school, threads of the community tapestry become visible. I saw children who delighted in taking care of their classmates, children with very little in their own snack bags freely sharing their small bounties. The calculativeness often evident in communities of adults was largely absent. I do not wish to romanticize my students here. They maintained semiclosed friendships, could be too ferocious defenders of community rules (e.g., "no cuts"), and found it difficult to hold dispositions that ran against the grain of adult values and norms. From these observations, a powerful insight emerged. That is, if something is important to someone, then it is important. Whether it was important to me had no bearing on the matter. Why it had taken 25 years and the actions of often happy, sometimes hurt children to crack open this door remains a mystery, to me at least.

One gift from my students that lightens my spirits every day is the understanding of the central place of imagination in general, but in community in particular. I had been taught, or at least come to believe, that it was adults who nurtured imagination in children. I learned then that it was the reverse and that the wisest adults could take the gift, mold it, and return it to young people if they had the will to do so. And I discovered that this

power could illuminate the confusing pathways of life. Dogs and cats and varmints of all varieties from the woods around our school wore badges of membership, even snakes, somewhat frighteningly for me with my adult responsibilities. More special still was the discovery that stuffed animals occupied exalted positions in community, a lesson I honor with my much older students and my family to this day, even when they struggle to recapture the gift they have misplaced on the road to adulthood.

From watching my young charges, I began to see teaching somewhat differently as well. My starting point was that my task was to help each of them accumulate the tools they would need to move successfully across future segments of their schoolwork and to negotiate the steps of life. Given that all of them were carrying satchels of significantly less heft than was desirable, this understanding maintained considerable legitimacy in my evolving understanding of my place in their lives. Although we generally found it tedious, we

spent considerable amounts of time pursuing this stocking function together. Yet I could see that accumulation, even at the ages of 6 or 7, did not carry the visceral satisfaction of discovery and understanding. The fact that this dichotomy existed was both a product of the system in which we worked and of my own shortcomings. I am more skilled today in helping people connect accumulating content chunks. Yet I remain concerned that the story is deeper than instructional expertise. There was a different texture and feel to understanding. This was a gift that I devoured and have worked hard to infuse into my life.

Reflection can be a powerful tool, even when covered with a veneer of distal distortion, which I suspect is somewhat the case here. But reflection at some length also has special powers. It can, I believe, crystallize essential lessons and foreground dominant threads in life's narratives. For me, doing so allows me to acknowledge gifts unknowingly given by 6- and 7-year-old children and, wherever they may be, to thank them for doing so.

## Chapter 8

### Poems

#### Humanity #2

a pencil, gone missing  
 borrowed or stolen  
 heartbreak,  
 tears of loss  
 fortified with more, inconsequential  
 to most  
 ignorance fueling disparagement,  
 trivialization  
 amelioration absent understanding  
 humanity diminished

#### An Unnecessary Death

all pulled together, a bundle of happiness  
 six years old and trailing joy  
 smiles piled high, one upon another  
 each moment another sparkle added  
 a spirit on fire

yet defenseless too  
 society on the horizon, approaching with haste  
 a caravan of the well intentioned  
 garbed in robes of judgment  
 valises stuffed with deficiencies  
 trailing the scent of failure  
 sacrificing light for scraps of insignificance

#### Just Passing Through

Taking up space  
 Getting by  
 Going along, getting along

Maintaining appearances  
 Following procedures  
 Adhering to the rituals

Engaging on the margins  
 Doing just enough

The wrong place at the wrong time  
 A tourist at the back of the room

#### The Gift Giver

To unsettle and alloy that bewilderment with joy  
 To allow flight and provide an unseen scaffolding  
 of support  
 To hold tightly while letting go  
 To correct with precision and warmth  
 To reveal mysteries and provide ladders for  
 climbing to understanding  
 To challenge, to exhort, to demand  
 To push, to pull, to carry  
 To build, to empower  
 To respect and acknowledge, to ennoble  
 To place one's own heart on the altar and one's  
 own hands in the fire  
 To remember the forgotten  
 To feel, to share  
 To dance in celebration  
 To pass into the shadows  
 To teach



**Tribute to a School Girl**

Defined by deficit discourse—genteel discrimination

Labeled into problematic social categories—a stereotype

Pardoned for uncommitted sins

Absented, dismissed

Muted, marginalized

Vaccinated against hope

Rural white trash

A wry smile, undefeated

Not dirt, not entirely

**High School**

a web of meaninglessness  
 marking time  
 passing through  
 going through the motions  
 taking up space  
 doing nothing  
 building masks  
 crawling by hurdles  
 reaching for the floor

a tapestry of irrelevance  
 aimless  
 inauthentic  
 lifeless  
 senseless  
 empty  
 barren

an oppressive necessity  
 hemmed in, corralled  
 unpaid labor, coerced work  
 a sick mistrust  
 a distasteful task

a thick fog of boredom  
 comatose  
 powerlessness  
 inertia  
 estrangement  
 indifference  
 alienation  
 resignation  
 hopelessness

a troubled end  
 decay  
 a last fight for the self  
 no where to go  
 withdrawn  
 who cares, why bother  
 too lazy to cheat, take the zero  
 and the football team had another losing season  
 but at least we learned to fix our own

## Chapter 9

### The Mournful Tale of the Death of Mr. School Improvement and the Wisdom of the Three Forensic School Improvement Sleuths

It was exactly at 10:40 a.m. that Mrs. Wilson found the corpse of Mr. School Improvement on the cafeteria floor. Mrs. Wilson, the volunteer coordinator at William Burnett Middle School, was on her way to get a “bite to eat”<sup>1</sup> before the first lunch-period students arrived. Generally, this daily trip was fairly mundane and usually Burnett was a pretty normal<sup>2</sup> school. You will, I think, not be surprised to learn that the experience of discovering the corpse of Mr. School Improvement had an unsettling effect on poor Mrs. Wilson. She immediately, and with considerable celerity, set off to find Dr. Johnson, the interim<sup>3</sup> principal of Burnett. Unfortunately, Dr. Johnson was the third interim principal at the school in the last 2 years. He hardly knew his way around the building yet and certainly didn’t understand the approved pathway of action for dealing with a corpse in the school, especially one as famous<sup>4</sup> as Mr. School Improvement. He did have the good sense to dispatch one of the deans to ensure that no students were permitted into the cafeteria until this issue was “addressed.”<sup>5</sup> He then called his boss, the superintendent of the Franklin School District, who informed him that she was immediately sending the district’s three best forensic school improvement investigators<sup>6</sup>—and would call the coroner<sup>7</sup> as well.

As promised, within 3 minutes Mr. Barnabus Dolphin (so named because he was a dolphin), Mr. Wolf (no first name), and Mr. Christmas Bunny (so named because he was a bunny and was born on Christmas day) checked in at the office and hurriedly made their way to the Burnett cafeteria, sans administrative entourage. Mr. Christmas Bunny was the first to speak.

“Pretty unpleasant business,” he said.

“Indeed,” said Barnabus Dolphin. “But perhaps it isn’t as bad as Mrs. Wilson suggests. She always was the jittery type.”

Any such hope quickly dissolved as the three detectives entered the cafeteria, after asking the dean to remain as sentinel.

“You were correct Christmas Bunny,” said Mr. Wolf. “Very bad business indeed. Dead without question.”

“It is hard to believe that it is really him,” said Barnabus Dolphin. “I haven’t seen him in 4 or 5 years. He looks terrible. He was just a young man when last we met, and a big strapping fellow at that.”

“Good fishmonger,” echoed Christmas Bunny. “Poor Mr. School Improvement looks like an old man.”

“He is all worn down,” chimed in Mr. Wolf.

“Let’s see what is in his pockets,” said Bunny. “There may be a clue or two there.”

A thorough search of Mr. School Improvement’s corpse uncovered only one large envelope, in the inside pocket of his sports jacket.

“Hmmm, let’s see what we have here,” Barnabus Dolphin remarked in an inquiring kind of way. “It is a large stack of FedEx delivery receipts.”

“Odd, I think,” murmured Mr. Wolf.

“Let me see those,” said Mr. Barnabus Dolphin in a reaching kind of way. “Just as I suspected. There are receipts here for 25 or 30 reform packages delivered to Mr. School Improvement at Burnett over the last half dozen years, a good 10–

12 arriving in the last 18 months alone. There's one for a block scheduling kit and another for a student advisory system. And here's one for an interdisciplinary-based inquiry program and one for a detracking plan."

"Good fishmonger," cried out Mr. Christmas Bunny. "Here are receipts for the delivery of a comprehensive school reform model and an entire small school. They must have been pretty large boxes."

"And here is a recent one for something called turnaround elixir," said Mr. Wolf. "Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?"

Two confirmatory nods.

"He seemed to be getting more desperate," said Mr. Christmas Bunny.

"And less coherent," said Mr. Barnabus Dolphin.

"That 'Hail Mary' strategy never works," lamented Mr. Wolf. "His back must have really been up against the wall. Such a bad end to such a promising start."

Just then the coroner arrived on the scene, looking a good deal like Doc from the Gunsmoke series.

"Hi, Doc" the three detectives nodded in unison. "Thanks for coming so quickly."

"My job," said the coroner, nodding in return. "Besides, being a school and all, I thought we best get this cleared up as quickly as possible. Who is he?"

"His name is School Improvement," replied Mr. Christmas Bunny. "Been at Burnett about 8 years now as I recall."

"Whoa," said Doc, "I'm not used to seeing senior citizens in middle schools."

"Ah, but that's part of the rub," said Mr. Wolf. "He's really only a young man."

"Hmmm," said the coroner. "Best be having a look."

In the meantime, Mr. Wolf and Barnabus Dolphin went to have a word with the sentinel (i.e., the dean). They asked him to call down and have Mr. Johnson convene an emergency meeting of the school leadership team for the second lunch period. They had questions. They needed some answers.

"And make sure Johnson orders pizza for everyone,"<sup>8</sup> Mr. Wolf stressed to the dean as they returned to join the coroner, who was just finishing up his examination of Mr. School Improvement.

"Well, Doc?" inquired Christmas Bunny.

"Poor guy is pretty beaten up," said Doc. "Look here, his entire body is covered with small bruises and thin cuts. Layered on over a long stretch of time, I'd say. And look here," he pointed, "there are quite a number of larger contusions as well."

"My, my," said Barnabus Dolphin. "We have not come up against that before in the district."

"No indeed," responded Mr. Wolf. "Nothing quite this bad, anyway. What's the cause of death, Doc?"

"That's the most peculiar part of the story," noted Doc. "Your friend, Mr. School Improvement, bled to death. Best I can tell he's been bleeding very slowly for quite a long time now. Hardly noticeable at any particular point in time but lethal over the long haul, as we see here," he reported in a puzzled kind of way. "Well, my people will be here shortly now and we'll get him downtown for an autopsy. Know for sure then," he reported in an affirming kind of way.

The three district investigators then headed off for the teachers' lounge<sup>9</sup> where Dr. Johnson had

gathered together the 12 members of the school leadership team, per their request.

“Thank you all for coming on such short notice,” began Mr. Wolf. “Know it is inconvenient, but we need your help. Has Dr. Johnson filled you all in? Good, we will get right to it then,” he explained with a nod to Mr. Christmas Bunny.

“Thank you again for coming” said Mr. Christmas Bunny. “We will get you back to your students just as fast as possible. Which of you knew the deceased the best?”

After some hesitation and a good deal of eye movement back and forth, Mrs. Peterson began. “A number of us were here when Mr. School Improvement came to Burnett. Let’s see, that would have been 7 or 8 years ago. All of us know him, some better than others. But I’m pretty sure none of the teachers who came in the last 3 or 4 years knows him well at all.”

“How did he get here?” asked Mr. Barnabus Dolphin.

“We invited him,” answered Mrs. Guimond. “Voted as a full faculty actually.”

“Any objections?” inquired Mr. Wolf.

“No, not really,” said Mrs. Guimond. “We knew he was a good friend of the superintendent, probably in our best interest all around, if you know what I mean.”

Unmistakable glances of acknowledgment followed throughout the room.

“Many of us were generally excited about his joining us at Burnett,” added Mrs. Fitzgerald. “Even the most jaded of us didn’t really see much downside. No real problem potential.”

“Hmmm” murmured Barnabus Dolphin. “How did he fit in? Did he get along with everyone all right?”

“Oh yes,” answered Mrs. Joy. “You know, when he came he brought a lot of extra stuff with him. You know, books, money for professional development trips, science equipment, stuff like that. And some things we really need at Burnett, too. He was always around. You saw Mr. School Improvement pretty much everywhere. Very helpful. Sat in on all the leadership team meetings, right at the table with the rest of us. And most of the department meetings as well. He was an attractive devil for sure, and we were drawn to him,” she added in a blushing kind of way. “Seemed to have a lot of money, too, which didn’t hurt.”

“He was at all the administrative team meetings also,” said Ms. Raschner. “I was an interim AP when he first came. Got along real well with the principal, too.”

“From what we can tell, and the coroner’s initial investigation of the corpse, it seems pretty clear that things were not going well here at the end for your friend Mr. School Improvement” said Mr. Christmas Bunny.

“Yes, yes that’s true,” said Mrs. Peterson. “Mrs. McCray had tried to alert us to possible problems way back at the start, when Mr. Improvement first came. Said she had worked with his brother at one school and his sister at another. Neither of those cases turned out well at all. She was clearly the most skeptical of all of us. Told us to keep our eyes open—and our ‘doors closed.’ Always was talking about the ‘past returning again.’ Smart woman, that Mrs. McCray.”

“And you know,” said Mrs. Fitzgerald, “he grew more tiresome and bothersome the longer he was here,” she reported in a somewhat annoyed but embarrassed kind of way. “He was kind of a my-way-or-the-highway type of guy. I never really had a sense that he understood much about Burnett. At least I never saw him make much effort to do so. Kind of knew everything already.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Mrs. Joy acknowledged, in a remembering kind of way. “He brought a whole

bunch of stuff from Caldwell Elementary School, where he was before. A lot of it didn't seem to fit. Ended up in the closet. Still there I believe."

Mr. Christmas Bunny gave a knowing nod to his colleagues. In their archeological work in school closets throughout the district they had uncovered more than their fair share of evidence to support Mrs. Joy's hunch.

A bit of twinkle appeared in Mr. Barnabus Dolphin's eyes and just a trace of a smile.

"Anything else?" said Mr. Wolf. "Did Mr. School Improvement have any friends?"

"Well, he was real tight with the superintendent at the time," said Mr. Rubio. "The guy before the guy before the current superintendent. Thick as thieves," he added in an inside kind of way.

"Not so much now, though," added Mrs. Peterson. "The superintendent brought in a whole new team—you know, new ideas, new people, new ways of doing business. Even redid the district organizational chart. Not much space for Mr. School Improvement and his friends there, I'm told."

A meaningful glance was exchanged between Mr. Barnabus Dolphin and Mr. Christmas Bunny, only an eyebrow movement but clearly sufficient for two of the nation's foremost forensic school improvement investigators.

"What about with the teachers?" asked Mr. Barnabus Dolphin.

"At first, he was liked by nearly everyone. Lots of friends, in a professional sense at least," replied Mrs. Jeffries. "You'd see him all the time in classrooms and hallways. Hung out a lot before and after school as well."

"What about now?" Dolphin asked in a probing kind of way.

"Things seem to have changed quite a bit," said Mrs. Peterson. "I know he still had a few friends in the AVID program and he gets along with some of the social studies teachers."

"He really has become quite the loner," said Mrs. McCray. "We hardly see him anymore. Spends most of his time in his office putting together binders on all sorts of things. I was in there the other day looking for him. He had promised to get me a sub so I could observe Mrs. Guimond's science lesson. But since no sub ever came, I went down to see what the story was."

More nuanced eyebrow movements from the three forensic sleuths.

"He wasn't there. Was told that he was at his regular meeting with some foundation at the district office. But his office was stuffed with stacks of really hefty binders. I remember that some were on his desk. One was on 'data,' another even bigger one on 'teacher quality,' and a monster-sized one on 'teacher evaluation.' Now that I think back on it, it seems odd that there weren't any binders on the children."

"Peculiar indeed," mused Mr. Wolf. "Anything else that you can tell us that might throw some light on the cause of Mr. School Improvement's demise? Any recent activity?"

A bit of a silence, then Mrs. Fitzgerald spoke up. "Well," she said.

An informed nod among the three detectives indicated that they had some sense of where the narrative was heading.

"Well," Mrs. Fitzgerald repeated, "as Mrs. McCray reported, he had become almost a hermit, and I believe the situation was getting even worse. We heard that Mr. School Improvement wasn't even getting along with the social studies teachers any longer, and we all know that that is hard to do."

"You know he had promised quite a lot when he came to Burnett," said Mrs. Joy. "And, as we said,

he seemed to have a lot of money, at least a lot more than any of us had ever seen.”

“You know we still got stuff from time to time,” said Mr. Rubio. “But we didn’t really know what to do with most of it.”

“And even when we did,” chimed in Mrs. Peterson, “when it broke there wasn’t really anyone to help fix stuff. We tried working on broken stuff in small groups for a while, but that petered out. Too much other stuff to do, I guess.”

“More and more of us just pulled away,” Mrs. Guimond reported, in an embarrassed but defiant kind of way. “You know, just closed our doors and went on with our work.”

“Hmmm,” whispered Mr. Christmas Bunny.

Mrs. Joy jumped in here. “I also don’t think that he had the ear of the new interim principal, Dr. Johnson. It wasn’t like they were at each other’s throats, though. I just don’t think they understood each other. In the old days, Mr. School Improvement and the interim principals always seemed to be together. We don’t see that anymore.”

“All true” nodded Mrs. Raschner, the school psychologist, in a meaningful kind of way. “But there is more here, I believe. I don’t think he saw himself as particularly successful. Even when things worked in one or two classes, they didn’t seem to take off. I think this really ate at him. He aged right before our eyes.”

“And grew less and less pleasant, too,” said Mr. Rubio. “Meaner and more pushy, I would say.”

“Oh my,” said Mr. Barnabus Dolphin, exchanging knowing looks with his forensic partners.

“At the last faculty meeting he told us that he had ‘friends in high places,’ insinuating that they were right at the top of the educational food chain in Washington.”

“He snarled at us,” said Mrs. Fitzgerald. “Told us that if things didn’t begin to shape up around here, ‘heads would roll.’ Said we would all find ourselves ‘out on the street.’ The words still ring in my ears.”

“He even threatened to sell the entire school to the Smoogle Hat Company,” chimed in Mrs. Guimond. “Very unpleasant.”

It was at this point that they saw the corpse of Mr. School Improvement being conveyed to the waiting ambulance.

“Well, I think we have enough for now,” Mr. Wolf reported in a gracious kind of way. “My colleagues and I want to thank you again for your help with this investigation. We are in your debt—as is the district and the education industry in general,” he closed.

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Later that afternoon we find the three renowned forensic school improvement sleuths at afternoon tea at Mr. Barkley’s House of Honey.

“You look glum, my friend,” said Mr. Wolf to Mr. Christmas Bunny.

“It is this unpleasant business with Mr. School Improvement,” he replied. “I can’t seem to shake it.”

“Me, either,” said Mr. Barnabus Dolphin. “Even though it is becoming increasingly common, it’s still sad.”

“I just don’t get the sense that he really knew what he was doing—and where he was going for that matter,” lamented Mr. Christmas Bunny in a mournful and disappointed kind of way. “And moving faster and working harder didn’t seem to help much.”

“Yes, he covered an amazing amount of territory but didn’t seem to really go very far,” said Mr. Wolf.

“And he irritated pretty much everyone to boot,” added Mr. Christmas Bunny. “Just another layer of organizational sediment at Burnett, I guess.”

“And the nonnourishing kind,” said Mr. Wolf in a faraway kind of voice.

“Let’s all have some more honey,” said Mr. Barnabus Dolphin. “It is good for chasing away school improvement ghosts and glumness.”

“What do you think will happen to the body?” inquired Mr. Barkley the Dog, who was refreshing their drinks and adding scones to their plates.

“I dropped by Mr. School Improvement’s attorney’s office (Boomer, Homespun, Hugger, and White Ear, Bears at Law) earlier this afternoon to see if I could get an answer to that very question,” said Mr. Wolf. “Turns out he asked for his body to be cremated and for his ashes to be spread on the lawn of the State Department of Education. But I wouldn’t worry too much. It turns out our friend Mr. School Improvement was a firm believer in reincarnation. So I suspect we will be seeing him again downstream.”

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1. Quotes contain actual snippets of language used by the person being referenced.
  2. We are using the term *normal* here in the normal use of the word, not with any educational or disciplinary referent in mind (e.g., psychology, anthropology, or statistics).
  3. Dr. Johnson preferred the term *acting principal* but interim was his official title.
  4. This fact will become clearer as the story unfolds.
  5. See Note 1.
  6. There was such a demand for this type of work that the Franklin District employed more forensic school improvement investigators than literacy coaches.
  7. The coroner was not a district employee.
  8. Although the pizza part of the tale may seem somewhat indelicate, in their forensic school improvement lab Mr. Wolf and his colleagues had seen more than their share of gruesome things, so eating was hardly out of place.
  9. A misnomer if ever there was one. Whatever this room was, it was not a lounge. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to imagine how anyone could lounge there.





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**PART 3**  
**NOTES ON STUDENTS**

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## Chapter 10

### Students in Peril: Deeper Understandings of the Failure of Students on the Wrong Side of the Advantage Gap

Students have been at risk of failure in school, and subsequent life beyond school, since the first schools opened their doors. Likewise, efforts to help students in peril have been in play for as long as we have had schools. Powered by concerns for the economic robustness of the nation, the political and social fabric of the country, and the welfare of children, considerable resources have been devoted to the problem of students placed at peril. There is a substantial body of evidence, however, that as a nation our efforts have produced decidedly underwhelming results (Reardon, 2003, 2013).

Over the years, numerous reasons, explanations, and justifications for our inability to prevent failure from deepening or to make real improvements have been offered by those from all quadrants of the explanatory matrix—from the poor and the rich; from conservatives, liberals, and libertarians; from the establishment and the outsiders. For example, the finger of blame is pointed at communities writ large (e.g., lack of care, insufficient commitment of resources), parents (e.g., too little or too much concern for their children), teachers and school administrators (e.g., feathering their own welfare at the expense of children, ineptness), and students (e.g., lack of motivation). Weak programs, insufficient resources, ineffective implementation of imparted wisdom, poor use of assets, and a host of other “causes” have also intermittently been drug onto center stage to help us see why schooling is letting the nation and its children down, especially children in peril from poverty (see Murphy, 2010, for a review).

But almost all of the academic, scientific, corporate, and educational forensic specialists miss the cardinal point in the narrative of failure for children in peril. Schools fail because they cannot succeed

as currently formed. That is, they cannot work with the essential elements that we have employed to craft “the school” we know and with a noticeable lack of attention to those elements that would be helpful. We have built up an understanding of and practice of schooling that largely ignores the most fundamental realities and dynamics that need to be underscored. The result is that schools make very little sense to students in peril and are often viewed as bereft of meaning and hope (Farrell, 1990; Gwadz et al., 2009; Steele, 1997; Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008; Weis, 1990). Schooling and all its supporters and defilers both continue to buttress a system that at its core will never work. Here are five hallmark “essential realities” that need to anchor schooling but are conspicuous by their absence, or if in play are surviving on life support.

To begin with, schooling consumes about 15% of the life of the average child (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Getting around the bases even with advantaged youngsters is very difficult under this reality. Getting to success with children in peril is an even more arduous assignment. If it were actually possible, we would not see every major area occupied by children in peril reaching such limited learning heights over their history of at-risk status. And all this despite hefty commitments of resources; almost martyr-like work on the part of many teachers; and often committed and charismatic leadership from educators, politicians, and civic leaders. If it were possible, we would not be witnesses to the deterioration of nearly every existent proof of success that educational researchers uncover.

Second, the 15% of the world that educators have used to help students, in other words, schooling, has not been constructed to house well a large

number of students, perhaps a significant majority, and almost all of the children in peril. The “essential reality” is that what Crosnoe (2011) and others described as the corporate model of schooling (see also Callahan, 1962; Laffey, 1982; Tyack, 1974) has only a small chance of helping students in peril succeed. The corporate understanding and application of schooling privilege elements that scholars have documented make little sense for these children or their families, such as competition rather than affiliation (Eckert, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Miller, 1995; Stinson, 2006; Weis, 1990). Concomitantly, schooling as we know it consistently has failed to include essential elements that would be required for students at risk to be able to work their way to success. It remains unclear exactly for whom we have built school, but it certainly is not students in peril (Irvine, 1990; Ream & Stanton-Salazar, 2007; Seiler & Elmesky, 2007).

Third, scholars of student engagement and disengagement over the last 30 years have shown us with amazing clarity that the modal position of adolescents in our schools is on the negative end of the engagement continuum (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Newmann, 1981, 1992; Newmann, Rutter, & Smith, 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamburn, 1992). That is, the majority of students and the overwhelming majority of students in peril are “putting in time” and “getting by” but not learning a great deal (Cusik, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sedlak, Wheeler, Pullin & Cusik, 1986; Weis, 1990). Even after ferocious efforts to “improve schooling” over the last 30 years, these students are playing on the fringes at the best, adhering to the form but not the substance of education (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Crosnoe, 2011; Finn, 1998; Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001). Students in peril are generally mere tourists in the schools that we have created for them, bystanders rather than members (Eckert, 1989; Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton, 2009).

Again, we return to the point that we get very little from the very little (15%) we have. Of course, the battle has been to encourage, trick, help, beg, and pressure students to be engaged. Because there is unimpeachable evidence that engagement is the critical catalyst in the academic and social learning formula (Balfanz, Herzog, & Maclver, 2007; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hattie, 2009), we have thrown a good deal into the fight (e.g., better curriculum, accountability). Yet engagement has not gone up. The problem is not the goal. The problem is that one of the cardinal essential realities of education is almost completely unrecognized (in any authentic manner) in the system of “traditional schooling” (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006, p. 419) we have created. That is, learning is nearly completely voluntary for students. Or as Hattie (2009) so nicely tells us, “It is students themselves, in the end, not teachers, who decide what students will learn” (p. 241). The failure to acknowledge this and to hardwire it into the architecture of schooling almost ensures that children at peril will not benefit from the form of schooling we have. There is very little reason for students to be at school. The workhouse we create for them is unappealing and fosters passive engagement at best and generally disengagement. There is very little authentic work and not much ownership. And we make almost no effort beyond anemic attempts at relevancy and related slight of hands to address the reality that students are the key determinants in the learning decision (Crosnoe, 2011; Joselowsky, 2007).

Our research on high schools that work (or do not work) has uncovered another essential reality that is honored most of the time either not at all in the corporate model of schooling or in a largely superficial and artificial manner. The reality is that students learn more from their peers than they do from their teachers (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Eckert, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Harris & Herrington, 2006; Opdenakker, Maulana, & Brock, 2012). Almost nothing one would see in a weekday visit to a middle or high school would show that adults were aware of this essential

reality. If they have uncovered it, there is scant evidence of that fact in the school they have built for youngsters. The message from the school is quite clear: Youngsters learn from their teachers. When “peer” learning is acknowledged, it is generally in the negative, the development of oppositional or counter adult norms and behaviors (Crosnoe, 2011; Patterson, Beltvukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007; Steele & Aronson, 1998; Stinson, 2006).

The fifth unacknowledged essential reality is that it is not the job of parents to do the work of the school. When one talks with teachers, the major problem they “see” and report is a palpable absence of student motivation. There is angst and despair everywhere in the teacher core over this fact. Given the school that we have built for students, especially those from low-income and working-class families, ferreting out of any real motivation would be newsworthy. In a related vein, when you ask “schools” (teachers and administrators) about the most critical problem of schooling, the modal answer is lack of interest and commitment on the part of parents for the education of their children. This is an even more robust lament when educators discuss students in peril.

There is, of course, an abundance of research on benefits of parent involvement on the social and academic learning of their children (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Bierman, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Gandara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Goldenberg, 2004; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Shannon & Bylsma, 2002). That is not the point. The key question is this: When did school people make the assumption that parents are supposed to take on the mantle of assistant to the school in the education of their children? Many parents, especially working-class and low-income parents, do not “see” the world this way. Indeed, they labor under the quite reasonable assumption that it is the responsibility of the school and its teachers to

educate their children. Their task is to make sure their children get to school and display proper respect for, or at least do not actively disrespect, school staff. They see their job as putting food on the table (Eckert, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Weis, 1990).

The point of the argument here is that schools fail because they cannot succeed. We have placed that point in somewhat stark form. Yes, some students succeed. Some youngsters in peril overcome long odds and achieve what was neither possible for their parents and grandparents nor for those adults they see every day in their neighborhoods. But most do not. Yes, in some ways, schools acknowledge that it is the student not teachers who have the leading role in learning. But at best it is an anemic acknowledgment. The same can be reported about the essential reality that children learn more from peers than teachers. Schools do try to build on this understanding, but timidly at best and artificially most of the time. Yes, creating partnerships with parents is a productive strategy to pursue to help youngsters in peril from poverty. But the absence of partnerships is not a fault or limitation of parents. It is instructive to remember also that it is a short step from “students are not motivated” and “parents are uncommitted” to “these students cannot learn” and “parents are to blame for failure.”

Reform fails because school as we know it is incapable of working, not because people do not care or devote considerable energy to improvement work. How many of us would wager our retirement fund on the bet that the students in Chicago, or New Orleans, or the Mississippi Delta are going to be in a stronger position academically in 2040 than are their children today and their grandchildren in 1980? Schools have very little hope of across-the-board (nonisolated, not ad hoc) improvement unless these essential realities become benchmarks planks in the school we build for youngsters, especially children in peril.

## Chapter 11

### Principles for Developing Culturally Appropriate Schools

For over a half century now we have sought ways to nurture the development of culturally relevant education. The best of this work begins with efforts to understand schooling through the eyes of children and their families—children of color, students from low-income and working-class homes, youngsters from various ethnicities and origins, young people with primary languages other than English, and so forth. Understanding in turn has helped fuel action. It has tempered singular reliance on ideological positioning to address the complexity and exhilaration of varied cultures in schools. More importantly, understanding has energized efforts to create authentic cultural responsiveness. History has proven to be an ally in this struggle. We see in our collective rearview mirror that much of the work here has often been weakly grounded in research. We see also that too routinely cultural relevance has meant adjusting children to a singular view of the world. These efforts have ranged from benign inattentiveness to promoting subtractive schooling.

This chapter presents what we have learned about effective and unproductive efforts to address diversity. That knowledge is molded into a design to create culturally responsive schools, one that features not sets of initiatives but rather an integrated and overlapping set of principles. Adherence to these principles offers promise of crafting authentic models of culturally appropriate schooling.

A considerable body of scholarship has revealed that cultural marginalization is deeply woven into the tapestry of schooling. Schools are places where too often stereotypes determine actions, venues in which too often microaggressions go unseen or, if seen, unchallenged. In such schools, children are often allowed (expected) to exert minimal effort, to go through the motions of schooling, and to accept life on the sidelines. Thus, the first step in forging culturally appropriate schools is to nurture the principle of affirmative schooling. In these schools,

youngsters are affirmed for who they are, not defined by what they lack, negatively. Educators in culturally appropriate schools do not pretend that students are unburdened by problems and challenges. However, they do not fall into the well-grooved pathway of “seeing” children through deficit eyes.

A second related principle is that adults and young people who struggle to create culturally appropriate places to learn and develop as people are sharply attentive to the concept of justice. This means to begin with that they have internalized school-grounded metrics of fairness and equity. They understand that these broad concepts must come to life in the normalcies and routines of everyday school life, in how students are addressed, in the expectations conveyed by language and actions, in the care and respect afforded to the less advantaged, and in how opportunities to learn are distributed. It also means that educators consciously create structures, policies, procedures, and activities to help justice go to root and flourish in schools. Equally important, it means that these tools are not simply organizational arrangements but are powered by a mixture of commitment and care.

Culturally responsive schools are dedicated to the principle that it is desirable to scaffold education on the cultural capital of students, families, and communities. We see here the threads of affirmation as well. Schools that are authentically involved with integrating community cultural capital are asset-based places. While they acknowledge the challenges that difference can surface, they are adept at pulling cultural capital into the work to ensure that each child reaches high levels of academic and social learning. These schools honor community norms and values in the quest for improvement. They do not ignore, silence, or disparage them. Such places understand at a deep level the

essentiality of context in the quest to create productive schools for every child.

The principle of care is also at the heart of culturally responsive schools. In our work, we find that many children in culturally diverse schools are invisible or marginalized. They are tourists in their own schools, taking up space and doing just enough to get by. Our research tells us that while academic press is an essential aspect of care, classroom and school culture is even more important. Invisibility and marginalization are inconsistent with a climate of care. In tangible terms, the principle of care means that every child has meaningful, trusting relationships with his or her teachers. Each child is known as a student and as a person. Children are routinely recognized for their successes and for their contributions to the achievements of the school. Students have opportunities to be authentic members of the school community. They have stock ownership in the school. There are widespread opportunities for leadership throughout culturally responsive schools, and large numbers of children find themselves connected to those opportunities. Every child feels supported in school, buttressed by teachers as well as peers. Finally, care in culturally appropriate schools is marked by a palpable ambience of safety and security.

In culturally appropriate schools, the principle of advocacy for children and their families is distinctly visible. Families in many of the schools spotlighted herein (e.g., schools in immigrant neighborhoods) have noticeable disadvantages in navigating social institutions such as schools. That is, they have less knowledge about the rules of the game (e.g., how to access needed services). Consequently, their children are often placed in handicapped positions vis-à-vis opportunity. Thus, an essential element of culturally relevant schools is adults who act as powerful advocates for students who are not infrequently left behind, advocacy for children in school and the larger community. Particularly salient here are teachers and school administrators who are adept at brokering support services and monitoring those services to ensure that diagnosed needs are being successfully addressed.

Finally, we know that culturally appropriate schools are characterized by the principle of instructional relevance. Historically, this is the most emphasized component of culturally appropriate schooling. It is, of course, a critical element in the overall narrative. We place it last to remind ourselves that it is only one item in a package of big ideas that require attention to cultivate culturally relevant schools. On the instruction side of the educational program, we know that having teachers who look like the youngsters is important. So too is scaffolding instruction on platforms that are consistent with the cultures of the children in the school (e.g., cooperative learning for African American students). Using styles consistent with the cultures represented in the classroom is a wise strategy. On the curriculum side of the educational program, it is important for students to see themselves in the materials they encounter.

We know that building culturally appropriate schools is a powerful avenue to help many of our children who fail to reach their full potential. Based on research, it can be argued that the real work is less about interventions than it is about honoring six core principles: (a) affirmative schooling, (b) justice, (c) scaffolding education on cultural capital, (d) caring relationships, (e) advocacy for children and their families, and (f) instructional relevance.

As with almost everything in the world of school improvement, principles provide the seedbed in which strategies can grow. Also, it is the integration of the principles that makes success possible. No principle on its own can carry the day. Also, consistent with the larger school improvement agenda, it is the principles that provide authenticity to policies and structures, not the reverse.

In the larger narrative of school success, culturally relevant schools can make major differences in the lives of children. On one front, they help students learn more than peers in less fortunate schools. On an even larger front, they create hope and possibilities, qualities in short supply in many schools. They provide children with meaningful futures.

## Chapter 12

### The Other Wall: Communities of Pastoral Care for Students

Over the last 35 years, researchers, developers, and school practitioners have substantially deepened our understanding of schools that work well for youngsters and their families. We have learned that schools that ensure that all students reach ambitious targets of performance are scaffolded on two foundational pillars that are braided together, strong academic press and supportive culture. Effective schooling is as simple and complex as this.

Based on this distilled knowledge and forensic analyses of schools' failures, a massive and vigorous assault on underachievement in America's schools has been engaged. New tools have been forged for the battle (e.g., charter schools, communities of professional practice). Older tools have been refurbished and polished anew (e.g., evaluation, accountability, time). At the center of this struggle has been a steadfast focus on making schools more academically challenging institutions and crafting strategies to help youngsters climb to levels of achievement that were considered unattainable for their parents and grandparents. This is wise policy and practice. As just reported, strong academic press is a major component in the equation of school and student success. But alone, it is insufficient for many, perhaps the large majority of young persons and for the overwhelming majority of students in peril of not reaching the new bar of success. What we know, but often fail to operationalize well, is that the culture that surrounds students and grows to define young people and their experiences in schools is critical in helping students rise to the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. This is especially the case for those youngsters on whom we are rightfully bestowing new attention and action, that is, students placed at risk.

The major difficulty with relying on the nearly exclusive focus on the academic side of school re-

form is that it ignores or pretends that the following foundational verities of education can be pushed aside:

- Students learn more from their peers than they do from adults.
- The “modal” level of student engagement is in the “passive disengagement” zone. (Academic press can help push engagement up somewhat but has limited influence, especially for students most in peril. It also carries the seeds of disengagement, a reality that requires careful management.)
- Learning pivots first and foremost on relationships, not textbooks.
- Academic success often has to pass through the door of culture.

If we acknowledge and work from, not against, these realities, we arrive at the empirically anchored conclusion that schools need to add highly visible strands of support, what we call a culture of pastoral care, to the tapestry of school—not as an add on or as a supplement to academics but as a foundational and integrated dimension of the educational enterprise. Many, perhaps most, children and adolescents are not going to be molded into better scholars using only an academic press. In quite practical terms, this means that educators need to spend as much time and energy building, updating, and monitoring a “culture of pastoral care” wall as they do currently on the highly visible “academic achievement wall” found in most schools.

1. In short, to help all students master ambitious learning targets, we need first to acknowledge the essential role of pastoral care in schools.

2. We need to be explicit about the components and elements that define a culture of care for students (e.g., membership).
3. Because the tools to “assess” these components are rather primitive compared to those available to measure academic learning, we (practitioners, developers, and researchers) will need to spend the time required to forge and refine them.
4. We will need to be as religious in tabulating, displaying, and using this information to enrich pastoral care as we are in using data-driven decision making to nourish academic press. More accurately, we need to be much

more expansive in how we conceptualize and define data-based decision making, creating a “wall” for supportive culture parallel to the one we have for academic press.

To set the stage for Assignment 3 above are research-grounded insights about the components of pastoral care for students, insights about the first and second points presented above. First, however, we reinforce an essential plank in our analysis. Whereas nurturing the development of pastoral care is productive and equitable in its own right, the concern here is upon its cardinal role in facilitating academic success. The empirically anchored logic model for pastoral care is displayed in Figure 1.

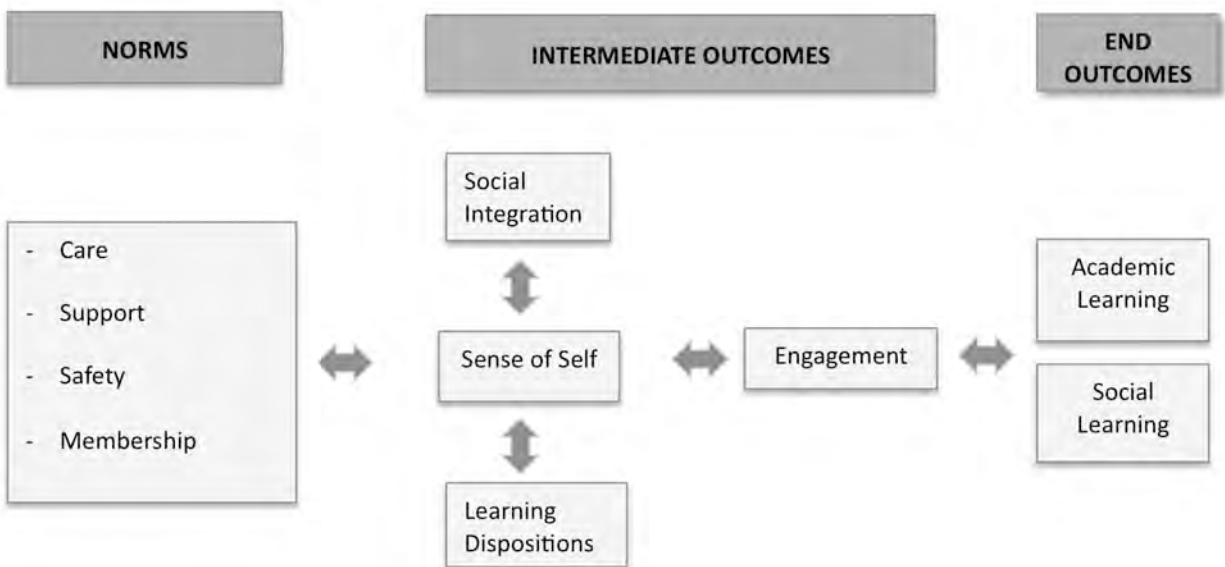


Figure 1. Communities of pastoral care for students

The engine of pastoral care is comprised of four powerful norms: care, support, safety, and membership (see Figure 1). Each of these norms, in turn, is made up of key ingredients, elements on which schools can track the positioning and growth of students and plan improvement strategies. For example, six elements define the norm of care:

1. Challenge students.
2. Emphasize creative and active work.
3. Orchestrate structured classrooms.
4. Employ collaborative activities.
5. Pull students to success.
6. Teach beyond the textbook.



It is from here that the assessment of pastoral care can be plotted. As noted above, however, unless we invest considerably more energy and resources on this half of the school success equation, culture of pastoral care will remain a step-child in the family of schooling.

The logic model also leads us to conclude that we need to be more aggressive, and more “scientific,” about measuring the important conditions that mediate connections between the four norms and student learning. In Figure 1, these are portrayed as intermediate outcomes: social integration, sense of self, and learning dispositions. A thick line of research tells us that the effects of a caring and supportive culture pass through these critical variables. We also know that, as was the case with the norms, each of these three states is comprised of essential elements. For example, the key ingredients of “sense of self” are

- self-esteem,
- efficacy,
- resilience,
- agency,
- autonomy,

- identity, and
- self-awareness

And again, the elements provide the platform for needed assessments.

The research and model also reveal that these three intermediate outcomes exercise significant influence on student engagement, both student engagement with the school and even more critically student engagement with schoolwork. Active, committed engagement is the undisputed doorway to student social and academic learning.

We know that a culture of pastoral care is critical to student learning. This chapter portrays this half of the school improvement algorithm and demonstrates how it works. Equally important, this chapter presents the conclusion on the understudied state of pastoral care in schools and argues that good measures of the variables in the model are very much needed, much richer and less ethereal assessments than we currently have at our disposal. We need to devote as much energy to displaying and using assessments of pastoral care to guide decision making in our schools as we do to academic press.



**PART 4**  
**NOTES FOR LEADERS**



## Chapter 13

### The Five Intelligences of Leadership

Over the last century, practitioners and academics have looked at leadership with multiple lenses. They have directed the spotlight of understanding on various dimensions of leadership (e.g., transformational leadership, moral leadership). They have also carved leadership into numerous components, resulting in the creation of assorted taxonomies and frameworks (e.g., the ISLLC Stan-

dards). In this article, we bring another perspective on leadership to life, what we call the intelligences of leadership. Our assessment is that five intelligences comprise the DNA of leadership: banked intelligence, fluid intelligence, connected intelligence, relational intelligence, and operational intelligence (see Figure 2). Each of these concepts is discussed below.

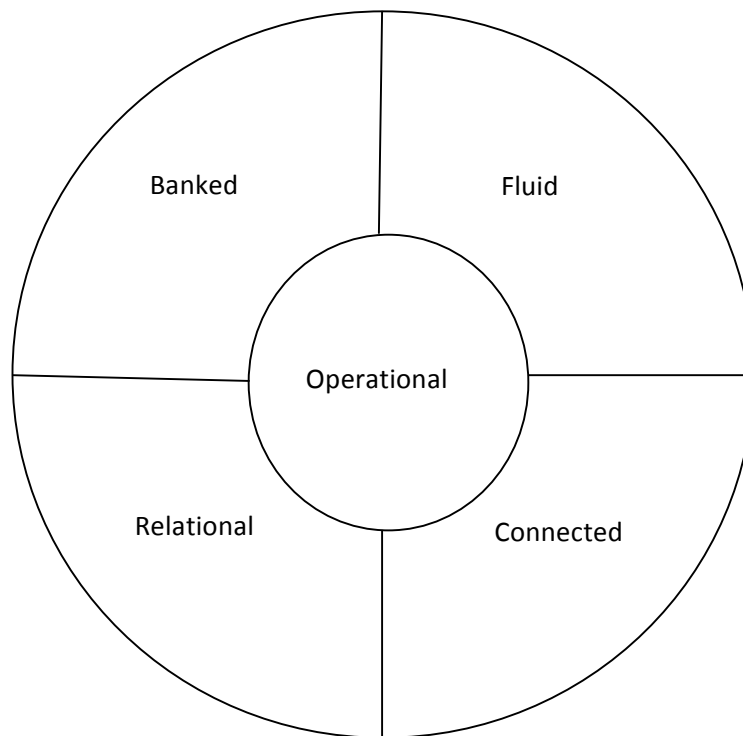


Figure 2. The five intelligences of leadership.

Banked intelligence refers to the content knowledge essential to the task of leading, what academics refer to as crystallized intelligence. A good deal of banked intelligence is generic; it stretches across industries and positions. For example, we find here knowledge of strategies to resolve con-

flict effectively, to successfully conduct a meeting, or to craft a productive strategic plan. Other banked knowledge is industry specific, in this case educationally anchored. For example, we find here knowledge of the laws on student rights. There is also job-specific banked knowledge, such

as that needed to be an athletic director or an assistant principal of student affairs. Finally, some banked knowledge is context specific (e.g., leading William Burnett Middle School in Fisher, Indiana, during the 2014-2015 school year). Knowledge of the teacher contract or the politics of the community could be essential at Burnett. Building content assets is always a wise idea, although as we discuss below leaders need to be able to bring those assets to bear on specific challenges, opportunities, and problems.

Fluid intelligence refers to the ability to think. That is, it is about the ability to puzzle through situations employing the banked knowledge at hand. The use of fluid intelligence is one of the essential ways that the need for new content knowledge is identified. Even more importantly, it is the main avenue through which often inert blocks of content are given meaning.

For example, working through ways to bring a passively disengaged and lonely (or actively disengaged and hostile) high school student into the community will necessitate injecting life into content knowledge about pastoral care for adolescents. In this case, the subset of knowledge about student–adult relationships and creating authentic membership in school will need to be brought forth and thought through. Without fluid intelligence, banked knowledge can often sit in the vault untouched.

Connected intelligence is the art and science of bringing pieces of the work narrative together in productive ways. In a number of venues over the years, I have argued that, given the complexity and turbulent world of schooling, growing alignment and coherence is a cardinal aspect of school leadership. Such is the work of connected intelligence. An example will be helpful here. We have abundant evidence that units (e.g., teachers, programs) and dimensions (e.g., budgets, goals) in schools often function as if they were in different galaxies. Working to craft all programs in a school around a particular point of view about student writing or a common perspective on student re-

sponsibility is an illustration of forging centers of gravity, using connected intelligence.

Relational intelligence maps onto dimensions of more generalized theories of intelligence. More specifically, it aligns with two aspects of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. So we see first that relational intelligence means possessing and testing a robust understanding of self in social context, that is, in the school community writ large. Relational intelligence honors the mirror of reflection, the wisdom to see oneself as defined by self and others and the acknowledgement, understanding, and thoughtful examination of differences. In many ways, because this intelligence is profoundly personal and because many school leaders have learned the protective dysfunctionalities of denial, blame, withdrawal, and justification, this is an especially difficult intelligence to master and polish over time.

Relational intelligence is also about understanding others. It is the cocktail of dispositions, knowledge, and skills to work productively with people. We know that the great majority of principals' time is spent in interpersonal interactions. We also know historically that principals have failed most often when they lack relational intelligence. Understanding how to work in authentic ways with children, teachers and staff, and members of the extended community is difficult business. Even when it is in play, it is often pushed onto the margins by pressures to follow the thick binder of procedural guidance that directs schooling. Yet without relational intelligence, it is impossible for school leaders to succeed.

The fifth domain of leadership is operational intelligence, also known as the ability to make things happen effectively in schools and school districts. It depends on the possession of the other intelligences. Surprisingly, and quite inappropriately, it is often dismissed as "management" or "technical skills." In reality, it is the knowledge to blend the various intelligences creatively and to positive effect in the face of work that needs doing, and, of

course, the ability to understand what work is required. It is often seen in anemic form in schools in cases where one or more of the other intelligences are underdeveloped. For example, we sometimes see principals operationalizing communities for teachers absent the relational intelligence required to make the work productive. In other cases, we see this work unfold without needed banked intelligence—the essential components of professional communities such as shared accountability and evidence-based collaborative work. On the other hand, operationalized intelligence emits a magical glow when it is in full bloom. Think of the elementary principal who has navigated the shoals of addressing student needs by changing the assignments of teacher colleagues midsemester. Or the secondary school

principal with the operational intelligence to successfully address a community crisis spawned by bullying in the school.

I acknowledge that there is an abundance of ways to think about leadership in general and school and district leadership in particular. I believe, however, that the intelligences of leadership provide a powerful framework to capture the work of school administrators. It opens new possibilities for thinking about the work. Even more importantly, it provides an especially robust architecture for the analysis of that work, helping leaders understand why certain actions worked and why others did not and pinpointing where intelligences need to be enhanced. It privileges learning, analysis, and action.

## Chapter 14

### The Four Defining Characteristics of Highly Effective Leaders

Since the onset of the effective schools movement around 1980, a tremendous amount of research has been accumulated on the actions of effective school leaders. Almost all of this knowledge centers on the functions or tasks with which leaders should be engaged. For example, it is well documented that leaders in productive schools and districts promote and shepherd a vision of education that privileges the success of every child. We also know that these leaders demonstrate the ability to align and integrate the many diverse components of a school or district, especially people, programs, and financial resources.

Over this same 35-year time frame, however, little attention has been devoted to uncovering the dynamic characteristics of effective school leaders. The information that we do have is often deeply embedded in the descriptions of leader behaviors. There are reasons for this, of course. One is that behaviors of school leaders historically played second fiddle to leader “traits.” It is quite appropriate then that actions and tasks now are on center stage. Another is that characteristics have come under heavy attack for being too intangible, too “fluffy,” too unteachable, and nonscientific (i.e., not subject to empirical testing).

Our work on leadership for school improvement over the last three decades leads us to a different position, however. There is no argument that a tenacious focus on leadership behaviors around the functions of school improvement (e.g., nurturing the development of organizational learning) is essential. We do find, however, that there is considerable cost in ignoring or demeaning the characteristics of effective school leaders, ones who have considerable influence in the narrative of school improvement. I discuss four of the most essential of these characteristics below: passion, persistence, optimism, and authenticity. Collec-

tively, they reflect an essential truth of education: Schooling is a human enterprise.

Deeply engrained in the studies and stories of productive leaders is an often unlabeled theme: passion. Effective school leaders are passionate about the institutions they shepherd. They are passionate about the work they do. And, perhaps most critically, they are passionate about the well-being of and success of the young people in their care and the teachers who promote that success. Passion plays out differently, of course, with different leaders. But it is never absent in good schools that remain effective year after year. It sounds corny, of course, which may explain the absence of study on the matter, but passionate leaders see themselves as engaged in something larger and more meaningful than a job or even a profession. Passionate leaders are almost always less ego centered than their peers. Their dedication and commitment push open opportunities that are often unseen in other schools.

This leads naturally to the second characteristic of highly productive school leaders, one again that only becomes visible as we peer behind the front stage of school improvement. Specifically, effective leaders are ferociously persistent in the pursuit of what needs to be done for their schools and districts. It is easy to say that failure is not an option. It is much more difficult to push and pull and carry a school to success. And when we look deeply into the chronicle of school improvement, we see that much of the success we find can be traced back to the commitment to succeed. All of us in the leadership business start out toward the goal of success. However, most of us when we arrive at what seem to be insurmountable barriers do the natural thing. We turn back or we set up camp where we are. Effective leaders confront these same barriers. However, they do not accept them as inevitable blockages. They are tenacious

in helping others find ways to climb over, tunnel under, or carve through barriers.

Persistence carries us to the third characteristic of especially effective leaders. These women and men are unrelentingly optimistic. Many of our schools and districts work under a veil of gloom, an inevitable sense that things will not work. The bad things that often befall students become givens, not challenges to be engaged. Schooling becomes a tough slog with little sense of hope. Possibilities seem foreign and unachievable. Damages inflicted on children from the larger world seem impervious to healing efforts. For too many children and their families, success seems a remote possibility at best. However, enmeshed in the mosaic of effective schools and their leaders is a pattern of optimism that becomes visible when we refocus our lenses. When we do so, we see that effective leaders are defined not only by their knowledge and skills with improvement functions (e.g., aligning the curriculum), but also by a powerful sense of optimism. Leaders are diligent in dispelling forces and actions that demean hope. Concomitantly, they are proactive in infusing systems, structures, policies, procedures, and actions that create a culture of possibilities for students and their teachers. They operate from frames of assets, not deficits. These leaders help create schools that our senses tell us are different than the average school. Optimism breeds hope. Hope breeds efficacy. And from all this, schools become places veiled not in gloom but rather the joy of community, engaged work, and accomplishment.

Entwined in all the evidence of effective leadership is the understanding of principals and superintendents as authentic persons. Our finding is not

that average leaders are inauthentic, but rather that authenticity as we define it is not a central dynamic in their leadership. Again, when we thoughtfully peer behind the screen of effective leadership behaviors (e.g., using data to inform decision making), we see women and men who are seen by those around them as authentic, caring individuals. They are cloaked in the garb of genuineness. They honor the values that undergird the school and the ethical principles of professionals. They are viewed by their colleagues and their students as trustworthy. They infuse respect into the school as they carry on with their responsibilities. They are people who others tell us can be counted upon to do what they say, what is needed, and what is best for members of the school community.

We close where we began. The purpose here is not to suggest that leadership actions around the instructional program and school culture are less critical today than they were yesterday. All great schools and effective leaders are marked by strong leadership in these two essential pillars of schools. Rather, the aim is to present the argument based on considerable evidence than when we look deeply into these schools, other elements of effective leadership become distinctly visible. These are the more deeply threaded elements of leadership for school improvement. Additional constructs could be highlighted, of course. However, my work leads me to conclude that ideas examined above are critical. I refer to them as the four characteristics of effective school leaders: passion, persistence, optimism, and authenticity. They are explanatory in nature. That is, they have a good deal to say about whether leaders can improve schools or not.

## Chapter 15

### Backstage Roles for School Leaders

Over the years, many colleagues have helped the profession conceptualize and portray school leadership. Much of this work has focused on important roles and functions that leaders perform to make schools operate effectively and move to higher levels of performance (e.g., evaluating instruction). I refer to this as “front stage” understandings and descriptions of school leadership. In this article, I move beyond this type of description to capture and portray a “backstage” understanding of leadership. All of our research over the last four decades leads to the conclusion that this backstage view is at least as important as more traditional perspectives and is often more significant. It allows leaders to peer into their roles in new ways, underscoring deeper and crosscutting understandings of their work, ones that carry a good deal of authenticity. Language matters a good deal, and applying new lenses to leadership can, we maintain, be very productive. To begin this work, the backstage work is separated into three bundles: leaders as seedbed developers, gluing agents, and caregivers.

The first law of school improvement is that structural changes do not predict school performance. Yet for almost the entire history of the profession of school administration, leaders have been and continue to be “importers” of structural interventions (e.g., block scheduling, looping, advisory periods). Many of these reforms are bought by schools. Others are gifts from district offices and states. Two troublesome problems are associated with this method of leadership. To begin with, structural changes (e.g., team teaching, cooperative learning) are often imported from venues without the goods (the DNA) that made them effective in those places. What the importing school leader often ends up with is an empty box (e.g., an academy), one that lacks the power to accomplish what the structural design was brought forward to accomplish (e.g., trusting relationships

between teachers and students). Equally critical, it is nearly impossible to get postindustrial structures to grow in the existing seedbeds of schools. For example, schools have a deep seedbed of learning built up from behaviorist understandings of teaching and learning. It is nearly impossible to get socially constructed reforms such as authentic assessments or cooperative learning to grow in a behaviorist seedbed. The soil is toxic. It will choke out these new perspectives on learning.

Thus, it is productive to think of the role of principals as *seedbed developers*, not importers. This “backstage” perspective underscores the fact that the primary role of the principal is to rework the deeply entrenched seedbeds in the areas of teaching and learning and school organization. Only then can important socially constructed and communal perspectives and ideas take root and flourish. Equally critical here, leaders need to help their schools come to understand and agree on the DNA or the core ideas they want to see grow in their schools before they worry about structural interventions. Structures can support DNA once a school knows what it wants. But structures rarely carry the DNA. So what this means is that school leaders are seedbed developers, people who stay focused first and foremost on the right stuff, the DNA of improvement—not the boxes people incorrectly claim carry the DNA.

A second very powerful backstage way to highlight the essence of principal work is to describe these leaders as *gluing agents*. As an advance organizer, note that this gluing work is about two activities: creating alignment, integration, and coherence and compressing variability. An age-old reality about schools is they are loosely linked places in which to work. On the leadership front, we are reminded of a great description of this condition from Larry Lezotte: schools are places where individuals come to run their business (e.g., Mrs. Wall’s fourth-grade class) surrounded by a



common parking lot. Teachers historically have worked alone with little nonsymbolic interference from leaders. Understandings of learning and teaching have been fractured, with teachers often following their own best ideas. At the school level, mission has had a weak pull on school activity. Resource allocations have been only loosely based on school goals.

Exceptional leaders are aggressive in resetting the dynamic of looseness. They search for domains that when aligned and cohered bring benefits to the array of actions in schools. Principals provide cohesion into schooling by inculcating core values into activities, or more accurately scaffolding activities on essential values (e.g., making care the central dynamic of cocurricular activities). They infuse coordination into ideas such as leadership density and professional community. They ensure integration by gluing together quite loosely linked transitions in schools (e.g., from the elementary to middle school or the middle school to the high school). They weld back together the often tenuously connected worlds of teachers and administrators. They bolt together and provide meaning to systems, policies, and practices that provide common direction and shared work. They are especially skillful in nurturing the growth of relational glue—trust—that allows coherence in schools to come to life.

Gluing work is also about compressing variability in schools. There is less inconsistency in schools shepherded by strong leaders. Effective leaders are essential to forging the parameters within which schooling unfolds. Work within these parameters tightens linkages and nurtures alignment. Work outside the parameters promotes loose couplings and undermines the integration essential for school and student success. As another grandfather of effective schools, Ron Edmonds, often replied when asked about the essence of effective schools: It is all the people in the school acting in a consistent and aligned

manner day in and day out across all aspects of the school.

Peeking backstage again, we see a third line of work that often goes unhighlighted on the front stage of school leadership, a mixture of concierge and homemaker. The core idea here is leader as *caregiver*. This means that the leader is at the center of a good deal of action. Some of this comes with the role. But effective leaders are gifted at developing webs of care and support that are much denser than what is normal in schools. They provide a hub of knowledge about how things are and who are the best people with whom to connect to accomplish tasks. They offer advice to everyone. Not only do they turn up opportunities that are often unknown to teachers, but they also are advocates in securing access to those opportunities. In a related vein, effective leaders see themselves as caregivers to very extensive families of students, teachers, and extended stakeholders. Exceptional leaders understand that their job is as much about creating communities of care as it is about building academic press. They demonstrate the ability to make each person in the school feel known, valued, and respected. They work to ensure that everyone experiences meaningful affiliation and has ownership in the school. And they scaffold the role of caregiver on trusting relationships.

The argument is that there is more to school leadership than the front stage functions that are often highlighted in the literature on effective schools. It is not that these tasks are not essential. On the contrary, we would not have great schools if these functions were not attended to carefully. However, deeply embedded, crosscutting elements are equally important in telling the story of effective leaders. These are backstage functions, ones that while critical are often only dimly visible in the play unfolding on the front stage. Three of the most essential of these roles are seedbed developers, gluing agents, and caregivers.

## Chapter 16

### Bad Leadership Numbers 1 and 2

#### Bad Leadership #1

A dyspeptic guide of belligerent spirit  
 A censorious personality of repellent severity  
 A corrupt accountant of deceits  
 A missionary of hopelessness

Undistinguishable for amiabilities of manners or  
 temper  
 Possessed with the capacity for making himself  
 disagreeable  
 Singular of attitude  
 Profuse of oaths  
 Unpliable by nature

Defined by dark and troubled edges  
 Etched deeply with the contours of pain  
 Endowed with radiant acuity, the clarity of revenge  
 Marked by the reflective twitches of a corpse

Outside the arch of love  
 On the outskirts of kindness  
 Innocent of joy  
 Exquisitely sensitive to the chill of hope

Hauling around relics of the dammed  
     those who did not know the consequences  
     of succeeding in what they attempted  
 Shepherding a pageant of the deformed,  
     a caravan of the tortured  
     a menagerie of the forlorn  
     a grim harvest of the feeble

A joyless voyage freighted with despair,  
     sounding a note of helplessness  
 A frenzied dissent into meaninglessness  
     ranging through the whole garden of loss,  
     a funeral atmosphere

a miasma of deceit, paroxysms of bile  
 a growing penumbra of dread,  
     and the lush clouds of gloom

Serial damage and a confluence of toxic tributar-  
     ies  
 Offering a thick crust of grief and  
 the chalice of wretchedness—  
     the counsel of defeat  
     the promise of failure  
     the emptiness of hardship

A meal scented with the stench of cowardice  
     calcified untruths, the  
     carapace of evil  
     the carcass of fear.

**Bad Leadership #2**

a disparate nightmare  
an unjoyous crowding  
    of doomed entanglement  
engaged in a strange barbaric trip  
an anarchic period of riot and confusion

lead by a forlorn figure  
an ill person of abnormal irritability  
    venomously jealous  
    violently pessimistic  
    pathetically self-destructive  
a person of odious treachery  
    vindictively intolerant  
    of unrelieved anguish  
    raw, brutal, disturbed  
a face of freezing scorn and hostility  
    ablaze with anger  
    visceral loathing  
a missionary of acute misery  
    of icy withering malice  
an envenomed portrait of greed  
    cankered with ranking rage  
    warped despair  
a conveyor of odious treachery  
a merchant of vehement horror

the stench of pain growing sickly pungent  
the odor of putrefication  
a terrifying vista inexorably approaching

a scene of desolation  
    joyless and austere  
a bleak and alien environment  
    a blighted presence  
conditions squalid in the extreme


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