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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools: a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
This reflection paper affords the rare opportunity to sit back and think about this course of study and how I ended up at this particular juncture in life. I have completed many classes, and all I have taken away is a grade. This assignment has given rise to the discovery that there is a foundation and value system at the root of my professional life. That value system is mine, and I am building on an existing foundation that realizes the necessity of education and sound leadership.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A Research Paper

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The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

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Master of Arts in Education

by
Ellen M. Williams
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Dr. Gregory Reed
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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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This reflection paper affords the rare opportunity to sit back and think about this course of study and how I ended up at this particular juncture in life. I have completed many classes, and all I have taken away is a grade. This assignment has given rise to the discovery that there is a foundation and value system at the root of my professional life. That value system is mine, and I am building on an existing foundation that realizes the necessity of education and sound leadership.

Educational opportunities are a basic right of all individuals. It is my personal belief that education provides a solid foundation for success in all areas of work. No matter what the chosen profession or career, a person simply cannot make it in this country without proper training and practice opportunities. The level of sophistication may differ from one individual to another, but everyone should have the chance to reach his or her full potential. Inclusive school environments level the playing field so students can access what they need to be successful. As a member of the Inclusion Resource Team at Grant Wood Area Education Agency, I advocated for students with disabilities to have the same opportunities as their general education peers. Sometimes adjustments and modifications have to be made, but the ultimate goal is to provide appropriate activities that allow all students to demonstrate their proficiency in a given area. Because I believe we are all “wired differently”, we do not all require the same things. As an administrator, I am sure to have times when people perceive my decisions or actions as unfair. I will have to remind them that ‘fair’ means everyone gets the opportunity to achieve to their highest potential. It will be necessary for me to model this attitude and belief because I expect to see similar commitment from teachers toward all students.
I know personally what it feels like to be different and to have others limit you based on physical characteristics and perceived mental capacity. As a young child, I remained hospitalized for almost two years, while recuperating from Guillain-Barre. During those months, I was totally dependent on someone else to care for me and my physical needs. Since my parents were not regular visitors, I often experienced feelings of being alone and on my own. I can still remember the women who spent hour after hour singing me to sleep, holding me close and wiping away my tears. Although I knew I was alone, I refused to be lonely. I was involved in every activity I could physically handle. Once I was ambulatory, it was a real challenge to keep me on my ward. I vividly recall the night I led a group of kids to the cafeteria where we sampled various jars of baby food. I can still see the midnight brigade making its way through the wide, dimly lit, hallway. The applesauce was a big hit and we dumped all the strained peas, beans and carrots! The next morning, the nurses discovered evidence of our nocturnal activities and demanded to know whose idea it was and how we got out of our beds without help. Not being very shy at that stage of my life, I immediately confessed that I had orchestrated the whole mission. As for getting everyone out of bed, we simply helped each other. As an administrator, I would take the lead in establishing an atmosphere where people help each other. I envision an environment where individuals are so closely linked they fully recognize the result of being mutually supportive. It would be my job to bring together a team of educators and community leaders committed to educational excellence and success for all.

Education began for me long before I was ready to attend preschool or kindergarten. It started in the confines of a loving, yet disciplined home. My grandmother raised me.
She constantly reminded me that she had never attended school more than two months in her entire life. As an uneducated woman, she had very few options for employment. She did domestic work, took in ironing for college students and cared for a daughter who was blind. She never complained about her plight, but she would always say, “Get as much education as you can. I don’t want you to have to work as hard as grandma.” Although my grandmother could read the Bible, she enjoyed having me read certain passages of scripture (particularly old testament books) she found difficult. She was proud of my reading abilities and often invited her friends to have me read things for them as well. I read letters for neighbors, recited dramatic poems in church and narrated numerous plays at school. I recall spending many hours reading anything and everything I could get my hands on when I was in high school. Some things I read would have shocked grandma, but she had no idea about the subject matter. She was just content to see that I was reading. She would spend her last dime to buy me a book. My aunt, whose name was also Ellen, sent me a new box of books and magazines every other month or so. Most of them were women’s magazines, mystery novels or the most current issue of popular teen magazines. I was also introduced to the works of such authors as Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin. I absolutely had a passion for reading.

Another thing I learned from my grandmother was about being excellent in every endeavor. I recall showing her one of my report cards. She was not familiar with the grading system, so she asked, “What is the best grade?” Of course, I answered her honestly and said a grade of A was the best. Her comment that day has been a driving force for me throughout my educational career. She said, “Then, that is all grandma wants to see from now on.” Obviously, she believed I had the ability to do the very best,
and she was holding me to that standard or expectation. I have often considered myself an underachiever; however, when I am invested in and committed to an idea or project, I want the outcome to be nothing less than excellent. By the time I went off to college, I had a firm grasp on the realities of life portrayed in my small community. People either left for college or stayed behind and worked in packinghouses, furniture shops and cotton mills. I remain grateful that my grandmother pushed education.

I continued to pursue excellence as an adult learner in all aspects of my life. For over 18 years, I taught and directed youth and adult choirs in my church. For me, writing and performing songs is a passion. When I directed, I did so with enthusiasm and conviction. I wanted every harmony perfectly blended, words enunciated and choreography precise. I am sure I put in innumerable hours of preparation time before and after each rehearsal. Once the final rehearsal and concert were concluded, I would look back critically at what could have been done different. I would begin, at that moment, to mentally list changes for next time. It is imperative to always reflect on a completed task immediately. If you wait, the experience will no longer be fresh in your mind and essential portions could be lost forever.

As a result of the reflection above I have identified four critical elements, which I believe are essential for exemplary educational leadership. They include integrity, collaboration, emotional competence and belonging.

A search to define integrity results in so many definitions that it is difficult to choose the right one. One dictionary defined it as the quality or state of being of sound moral principle, unimpaired, complete; uprightness, honesty and sincerity. Integrity can be as simple as doing what is right, even when there is no one watching or evaluating your
motives. Integrity is like having your closet door open for everybody to see. One often thinks of honesty and fairness as qualities embedded in integrity.

An often-played television commercial shows a woman rubbing flour on her face and apron in the kitchen, while her guests in the next room anticipate her tray of baked goods. Rather than confess that the baked goods are a packaged product she simply baked, she wants her guests to believe she spent hours preparing the goods from scratch. The woman lacks integrity. Although this example seems to have very little to do with leadership, it is a visual reminder that integrity has to become a way of life in all settings, circumstances and situations.

Integrity is a vital characteristic in any leadership position or role. Without it, one’s leadership will be ineffective. Parents must possess integrity when raising their children. Children must be able to see character, competence and consistency in their parents. Once there is a breach, the child often has difficulty trusting, obeying and even respecting the parent again. Sometimes the damage is irreparable and the relationship is never restored.

In educational leadership, an administrator functions as an overseer of all the tasks to be completed on a local, state and federal level. Just as the parent is called to teach by example, the administrator must lead by example. He or she must nurture, sustain and advocate for all members of the learning community. According to Wilmore (2002), school leaders must demonstrate respect for every stakeholder through honesty; hold confidences and treat everyone with dignity regardless of his or her circumstances.” (p. 81)

According to Fogleman (2003), Chief of Staff, United States Air Force:

“Integrity and leadership are inextricably linked. Without integrity, leadership theories are just that— theories. Integrity is the cement that binds organizations together, the cornerstone of mission accomplishment.” (p. 39)
Fifty years ago, the majority of the American public had similar values. There was essential agreement on what was right and what was wrong. In the first 60 years of the 1900's schools were expected to guide and discipline. Children expected to pay consequences for their actions. Since the 1960’s values have become more individualized and therefore more ambiguous. Today some parents may believe schools should tolerate rebellious behavior.

There is a great deal of evidence in the news to support the fact that some corporations like Enron value profits over honesty. In some cases educational leaders are following this decline in integrity. One example is motivating teachers to “teach” students to do well on standardized tests. Some educational leaders believe they have no choice. Iowa educators are beginning to feel pressure as “failing” schools are identified. The Des Moines Register reports the consequences of failure to do well on standardized tests. “Only schools that receive Title I money face the sanctions, which range from the transfer option to a requirement to provide private tutors, replacing school staff and ultimately being shut down.” (Bolton, 2003, p. A1) As the survival of individual schools becomes dependent on performance, it is not difficult to imagine that compliance may replace integrity for some educational leaders.

People need to trust those who show the way so that they can commit to them without becoming disillusioned. In other words, they need to know leaders will keep their word. The integrity factor becomes obvious for those in public life; everyday, the record is set out for all to see. Depending on their track record, these public figures are both trusted and respected or not. Without integrity, leaders are considered unreliable.
Integrity is based on values and actions. Values are who we are. How we act upon our values makes us what we are. Action, which corresponds to implicit and explicit values, results in integrity. Integrity is obviously not something we are born with and develop. It is a learned behavior. Therefore, all of us have the opportunity to develop integrity in leadership.

The challenge to educational leaders will be to meet standards without sacrificing integrity. The only way to succeed will be to utilize instructional leadership. Success cannot be realized alone but will require the efforts of the community, teachers, parents and students themselves. In order to capture the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of all contributors, the educational leader will have to demonstrate integrity in all matters, large and small or disillusionment will follow. In a culture of integrity the participants will not always agree, but they will learn to trust that the leader and the other participants are focusing their efforts so that all may be successful. It is easy to see how the lack of integrity has hurt the economy. Investors, who lack trust, do not invest their resources. One has to keep in mind that integrity is the most important ingredient in leadership. Integrity is not what we do but who we are, in times of prosperity and adversity. Leaders who possess integrity have nothing to hide and nothing to fear. Integrity establishes our priorities and what we will accept and reject. It defines how we respond to conflict before it arises.

Leaders with integrity are sincere and consistent. They have substance and character. Their actions match their words. The more a leader’s behavior matches his or her words, the more loyal people will become to that leader and organization.
A single example of integrity may make an impression, but a leader’s behavior must be consistent if he or she is to successfully shape an organization. Actually, integrity is an imperative, since a single breach of integrity can leave a permanent scar. Leaders must be consistent and fair in the enforcement of disciplinary standards. Nothing destroys staff morale quite as effectively as the leader’s inconsistent application of standards.

To be an effective leader, one must have more than the image of integrity. One must also possess substance.

President Abraham Lincoln once told a story about a farmer who had a tall, majestic-looking tree growing next to his house. One morning he saw a squirrel run up the side of the tree and disappear into a hole. Curious, the farmer looked into the hole and discovered that the tree he had always admired for its apparent grandeur was hollow inside and in danger of falling on his home during a strong storm. (Phillips, 1992, p.55)

Just like that tree, educational leaders who appear to have substance, but lack internal integrity, will not be strong enough to make it through the tough times. Leaders who possess only a veneer of integrity cannot build organizations capable of withstanding difficult challenges.

A good leader is not necessarily effective, just as an effective leader is not necessarily good. However, a good leader can also be an effective leader. If one defines a good leader as one who possesses integrity, then an effective leader can be defined as one who gets things done. Our political history is packed full of effective leaders, good leaders, and a combination of the two. For example, one might consider Martin Luther
King, Jr. a good and effective leader, while former President Jimmy Carter would be an example of a good leader. He was considered a person of high integrity—ethical, honest and trustworthy. However, some political analysts feel he did not get re-elected because he was deemed ineffective. One major problem for him was his inability to negotiate the release of the hostages during the Iran crisis. When looking at the Clinton administration, one can quickly observe the contrast. Most people would not consider former President Clinton a person of integrity. However, many Americans considered him an effective leader. He had many accomplishments, including a balanced budget, health care reform and gun control. Exemplary leaders show their integrity by performing all tasks to the maximum extent of their ability with the embedded principles of trust, honesty and morality. They strive for excellence despite the relative importance of the task or who gets the credit. Since organizations tend to take on the personality of their leadership, building integrity must be modeled from the top, down. When leaders show that they have character and integrity, people will trust them and follow them.

A second critical element necessary for exemplary leadership is collaboration. As a participant in my cohort, I have realized the power of working with others in an effort to accomplish tasks. Although I have worked in many groups before, the cohort arrangement provides a much different experience. We are learning the same information, but the experiences we bring to the discussion further enrich our learning. As we get to know each other, each participant brings valuable perspectives unique to his or her assignment, background and philosophy. This information, and the experiences gained since August, leads me to believe that collaboration is a critical element necessary for exemplary educational leadership.
Alliance, group effort, teamwork, partnership, and cooperation are all synonymous with collaboration. Whatever term one chooses to use, in order to collaborate, a group of people must have a shared vision or purpose. All must commit, individually, to do their share in bringing about the desired outcome. According to Senge (1990):

In a corporation, a shared vision changes people's relationship with the company. It is no longer "their company;" it becomes "our company." A shared vision is the first step in allowing people who mistrusted each other to begin to work together. It creates a common identity. In fact, an organization's shared sense of purpose, vision, and operating values establish the most basic level of commonality. (p. 208)

Successful partnerships recognize the strengths of its members. All members are valued and indispensable. They bring special skills and information to the table. For a team to come together, there must be open communication -- brainstorming, clarification, inquiry, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, mutual respect for all ideas, and attentive listening.

The educational leader who promotes success for all students by collaboration realizes it takes many resources to get the job done. This leader is fully aware that he or she will need to rely on the expertise, support and resources of other individuals, groups and businesses to assure success for all members of the learning community. He or she must have the ability to delegate some tasks while assuming the helm for other responsibilities. The administrator must take the leadership role in reaching out to the community to seek their perspective, facilitate discussion and identify common values. In other words, he/she must lay the groundwork for future collaborative interactions.
Relating to people is essential if one is to be an exemplary educational leader. Leaders for change get involved as learners and become critical consumers of management theories—tossing aside empty ideas and retaining ideas that appear promising. Families and children should be the number one priority, so it is imperative that leaders solicit, welcome and encourage them to become an integral part of the school community. Families are so critical in the collaboration process that it is essential that leaders try to first understand their interests, issues and perspectives. They should always feel acknowledged, appreciated and valued. Just as we (leaders) solicit families, we should also seek input from multiple stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. This diversity involves race, gender, culture, religion, socioeconomic status, political preference, special interests, different learning modalities and disabilities. Individuals from diverse groups are a part of our learning community and society as a whole. We need their support, input and resources. If the partnership is successful, each group gives, receives and ultimately benefits from these collaborative efforts.

Relationship building is necessary to foster and nurture productive collaboration. The educational leader should work hard to develop close personal and positive relationships with students, teachers and families. He/she must understand the politics surrounding issues of diversity, while advocating for the needs of all students. Chances are, if one works in a large urban school, it will be more difficult to establish relationships with families, students and other stakeholders. Building relationships in larger urban schools will require even more effort on the part of the educational leader. It will require a greater sacrifice. Developing desired partnerships is time-consuming and means putting
According to Koellner (2002), chief people and administration officer for The Boeing Company, collaboration has never been as important to business as it is today. Small businesses and massive global companies are using collaboration to accomplish goals. Successful businesses know how critical collaboration is and recognize the power of skills, intellect, thoughts and ideas each team member brings to the table. Koellner also suggests technology now plays a significant role in collaboration because we can now team with people we've never even met, people whose language we don't speak and now there are no boundaries such as time and geography.

T.R.I.B.E.S is an example of a collaborative instruction model. A TRIBES school is a learning community. It engages teachers, administrators, students and families in working together to create an environment of caring and support, active participation and positive expectations for all students. Skills taught in TRIBES help students develop collaborative competence. They are taught specific rules or agreements for interacting in cooperative groups. Community agreements include attentive listening, appreciation/no put-downs, the right to pass and mutual respect. Students learn collaborative skills that will assist them throughout their adult lives, if they choose to make use of them. This process can be used for a wide range of activities such as resolving playground issues or updating student handbooks. Kindergarten serves as the foundation for academic preparation; therefore it seems only reasonable that positive social skills be taught at this level. There is a need for even greater emphasis on social skills according to Gibbs (1995):
The basic 3 Rs, Reading ‘Riting and ‘Rithmetic may have been sufficient for an age gone by, but our entry into a higher tech/high touch age requires the addition of 3 social Rs, Relatedness, Respect, and Responsibility. These are the basic habits of the heart so desperately needed through our schools, families, communities, nation, and workplace. (p. 75)

Collaboration or partnership is not a one-way street. All parties should benefit if communication remains open and honest and if the group remains focused on the vision.

An educational leader is responsible for initiating opportunities for the school community to develop outside partnerships in an effort to fulfill the vision of success for all students. He/she will need to be visible in the community, proactive and vocal about the successes and needs of the students and school. He/she must sustain the vision amidst the pessimists and cynics. He/she is responsible for communication with stakeholders in order to maintain positive working relationships with all members of the community. The educational leader must show keen awareness at all times - keeping a thumb on the pulse of a community that is constantly changing.

The third critical element necessary for exemplary educational leadership is emotional competence. A student may qualify for the gifted and talented program, but he or she may have difficulty getting along with teachers or peers. This student would appear to have superior cognitive abilities but deficits in emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence has its roots in the concept of “social intelligence,” which was first identified by E.L. Thorndike in 1920. Psychologists have continued to uncover other intelligences and have grouped them into three clusters: abstract (the ability to understand and manipulate with verbal and mathematic symbols), concrete (the ability to
understand and manipulate with objects) and social (the ability to understand and relate to people). (Ruisel, 1992, pp.281-296)

Long before the term “emotional intelligence” came into use, researchers measured related concepts such as social skills, interpersonal competence, psychological maturity and emotional awareness. Social scientists are just beginning to uncover the relationship of emotional intelligence leadership, group performance, individual performance, interpersonal/social exchange, managing change, and conducting performance evaluations. Goleman (1995) states, “Emotional intelligence, the skills that help people harmonize, should become increasingly valued as a workplace asset in the years to come.” (p. 160)

Educational leaders should perfect their interpersonal skills as well as general intelligence, technical and professional skills. It is common knowledge that it takes more than brains to be successful in life. One must also develop and maintain positive, healthy interpersonal relationships. Emotional stability as a leadership trait is very important. Having the ability to control emotions to the point that one’s emotional responses are appropriate to the occasion can be the difference between calm and calamity.

Although research suggests that emotional intelligence is important for success in work and in life, it should be noted that by itself it is not a strong predictor of job performance. However, emotional intelligence lays the foundation for competencies that are. There is a distinction between emotional intelligence and emotional competence. Emotional competence refers to the personal and social skills that lead to superior performance in the work arena. These competencies are based on emotional intelligence. Therefore, a certain level of emotional intelligence is necessary to learn the emotional competencies. For example, if one is able to accurately recognize what another person is
feeling, this person has the foundation for developing a specific competency such as influence.

In 1996, David McClelland studied a large beverage firm that used standard methods to hire division presidents. Within two years, 50 percent of them left, mostly because of poor performance. When the company started making selections based on emotional competencies such as initiative, self-confidence, and leadership, only 6 percent left in two years. Furthermore, the executives selected based on emotional competence were far more likely to perform in the top third based on salary bonuses for performance of the divisions they led: 87 percent were in the top third. In addition, division leaders with these competencies outperformed their targets by 15 to 20 percent. Those who lacked these competencies under-performed their peers by almost 20 percent. (McClelland, 1999, pp. 331-339)

Possessing foundational emotional intelligence will enable the educational leader to develop needed competencies. Core components of emotional intelligence include self-awareness (the ability to know not only one’s strengths but also weaknesses); self-regulation (the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods—to think calmly before acting); motivation (the ability to pursue goals with energy and persistence—a passion to work for reasons other than money or power); empathy (the ability to understand the emotional makeup of others and skill in treating them in accordance with their emotional reactions); and social skills (the ability to build rapport with various segments of society and create a network of people). A leader who is in control of his/her feelings and impulses is able to roll with the changes that take place on a daily basis. This leader will create an environment of trust and fairness. He/she will
thoughtfully consider employee’s feelings/concerns—along with other factors—in the process of making intelligent decisions. He will listen well and really try to understand what others want and what their concerns are. It is difficult to understand staff, students, family or other stakeholders without emotional competencies. As demands on one’s cognitive, emotional and physical resources increase, emotional competence will become an even greater asset to the educational leader. While IQ, technical and professional skills are important; the recipe for exemplary leadership would not be complete without emotional competence.

The final critical element for exemplary educational leadership is belonging. For some students, arriving at school each morning is like entering a foreign city where inhabitants quietly identify you as the “ugly American”. Your clothes are wrong, your language is wrong, and you are illiterate in the basic social skills necessary to engage the access points of the system. Those inhabiting the access points are people who belong. Overtly you may be welcomed. Covertly, most wish you would just go home.

Students who do not “belong” will struggle to find success. Belonging in this context is defined as finding relationships, feeling safe, comfortable, accepted and respected within the school community. The lack of belonging may impact all students to some extent for brief periods of time. For example, elementary students experience cultural shock as they transition to middle school. In response, school districts develop transition plans to assist students in finding ways to belong in the new school setting. Schools continue to experiment with transition to ensure that students are successful. Many students find new ways to belong in their school settings. Some students, particularly those of racial or ethnic minority status never do.
...it starts right at the beginning of the year when everybody tries to be real nice. They hook you up in the same homeroom with the same teachers because they think you don’t know nothing and you’re stupid and you don’t speak English the right way or something. And they talk real loud and slow so you understand what they’re saying just because we’re from Mexico. It’s like the school already made up their mind about us even before we got here that we’re dumb and if we change in school like they tell us then we’ll stay of out trouble and we’ll make it okay. I guess they want us to act different like our families didn’t come from Mexico or something and we should be like we’re American in school like that’s something right or whatever. (Pena, 1997, personal domain section, ¶2)

From the perspective of a systems model, administration, teachers, the local community, parents and siblings impact student belonging. While school communities have long rallied behind the affirmation that success cannot be achieved without the community, in reality schools often experience isolation because their boundaries are essentially closed to meaningful input from the surrounding systems.

Beginning at the administrative level few clear answers exist. How will a school facilitate students belonging? Programs may or may not increase student success due to lack of empirical data results. For example, one article admonishes school administrators to “affirm student importance and provide encouragement to them.” The author goes on to encourage awards programs to include many students rather than just the top students. (Brown, 1999, School climate section, ¶3) However not all students seek formal recognition, particularly academic recognition:

Underachieving students...neither pursued recognition for academic performance
nor did they seek association with high achieving students. For them, high achievement was like ‘being Anglo’ or Anglocanized with negative consequences for their Mexican identity.’ (Pena, 1997, Interpersonal domain section, ¶5)

Regardless of all other factors, administrators clearly require objective feedback regarding the true success of their endeavors. Administrators exercise leadership by developing a vision for each school community. The vision must include ways to achieve student belonging whether the school is located in an all white, upper income district or a mixed district with multiple races and levels. In a very real sense, students who are different because of race, ethnicity, disability or ability (in the case of gifted students) must transition into the cultural setting of each school. From much of the available literature regarding best practices, it appears that success is currently being achieved building by building. It seems likely that this approach will continue because interventions that work well in one school setting will not necessarily generalize to another school with different characteristics. Even when school demographics appear similar, regional differences will likely necessitate different strategies.

Teachers exercise a tremendous impact on student feelings of acceptance and respect. Teachers often have little or no familiarity with students from different cultures. One study involving Mexican-American students documents that teachers create measures of success and failure based on no objective data whatsoever

Explanations provided by school personnel for students' social patterns were similarly attributed to the compliance and resistance of students and to students'
attitudes about their Mexican culture. Teachers generally believed that high achieving students were "more pleasant," "sweeter," "comfortable" and "at peace" with their Mexican culture for instance, than were underachievers who were "less forgiving," "bitter," "angry" and "more combative" when they perceived their cultural traditions were being insulted.

Teachers also described high achievers as "happier" and from "better more supportive homes." These teachers added that high achieving students had "more desirable" and "greater numbers" of "white and Mexican American" friends than underachievers who tended to associate with "other poor performers" and "less friends" who are "usually Mexican" and "friends that are usually in trouble too."

Finally, teachers also believed that higher achievers were more likely to "succeed" and "make something" of their lives than were their underachieving peers who "seemed less trusting" and experienced "more trouble making than their few friends. (Pena, 1997, Interpersonal domains section, ¶10)

The underachieving students did not feel a sense of belonging in this case because in truth, the teachers did not accept them.

Caring staff focuses on building relationships with individual students. However it may be counterproductive to focus on relationship building as an end in itself. One article describes how successful relationships can be built:

According to research, mentorships work best when mentors focus on developing competence, stressing specific knowledge and skills, and doing things that make sense to their protégés. Warm interpersonal relations—a central goal of the
mentorship for many mentors—are more likely to result from a focus on building competence than from a focus on building a relationship. (Raising, 1995, Adult-student mentoring programs section, ¶5)

The good news is that building competence is generally a goal of educators. In other words, educators do not need to function as social workers or counselors to build relationships. They can continue to be teachers. The bad news is that it is difficult for teachers to spend time with individual students, the method in which mentorship is generally done. One school in Shoreham, New York directly assigned an adult advisor to each student in an attempt to increase the sense of belonging, and to strengthen the relationship between adults and students within the school.

Each professional staff member at the school—including the principal trains to be an advisor to a group of up to ten students. The advisor meets with his or her group daily for ten minutes before classes to begin to discuss school issues and students’ activities. Students and their advisors meet later in the day for 15 minutes to eat lunch together...The student gets to know this adult well and learns that at least one person at the school will hear the student’s side of things.

(Raising, 1995, Student advising section ¶5)

This kind of programming requires the administrator to change how teachers use their time. It also requires teachers to step out of their traditional roles and to teach in a different way. In another instance, one middle school counselor identified all the students in his school that did not belong to a club or participate in an activity. He then created a new club for those students and helped them to develop a service-oriented mission. One of their service activities was to direct traffic at all school functions, which gave students
in the club high visibility in the school. (Brown, 1999, Improving school climate section

While staff have the ability to choose to function in different ways in order to build relationships, a less controllable variable in creating a caring community is the presence of diversity in staff. Sustained efforts to recruit minority instructors must gain momentum in order to make schools successful places for all.

The community and parents also impact a student’s sense of belonging. Communication between schools and the community and families is often one-way and sporadic. Sometimes there is no communication at all, although conclusions are reached nonetheless. Teachers may make judgments of the supportiveness of families based on their own interpretations:

“... teachers also described the parents of high achievers as more supportive than the parents of underachieving students without talking to them or visiting their homes.” (Pena 1997, Formal and informal domain section, ¶7)

Parents may avoid interactions with schools based on their own past experience with schools. (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995)

Parents can increase the student’s sense of belonging by becoming an advocate for their child. A parent institute in Minneapolis provides training for parents to act as advocates for their children. (Billig, 2001) In the Southwest, Parents for Educational Excellence provides advocacy training for Hispanic parents. (Chavkin and Gonzalez, 1995) Schools must find new ways to activate the rhetoric that parents are valuable assets in the educational process. Utilizing parent volunteers to cut, paste and copy or to participate in field trips may be a real assistance to teachers. However, limiting the role of parents to
carrying out the vision set forth by "the professionals" is hardly an honest attempt to tap into parents as valuable members of the education process. Parents must be involved in planning the vision in order to give meaningful input. Language, socioeconomic circumstances and lack of a common culture are not barriers to involvement in the school setting. In Phoenix the Alhambra School District regularly assesses the needs of parents in several languages. In Texas, schools distribute parent guides on understanding standards. (Billig, 2001) In one community, PTA members call each new family welcoming them to the school. (Schumacher, 1998) In another, all families attend a school orientation disguised as a barbeque and bingo night. (Fields, 2001/02)

   Reciprocal, caring, respectful, and participatory relationships are the critical determining factors in whether a student learns; whether parents become and stay involved in the school; whether a program or strategy is effective; whether an educational change is sustained; and, ultimately, whether a youth feels he or she has a place in this society. (Benard, 1995, Conclusion section, ¶1)

   Finally young people themselves impact their own sense of belonging. They wonder how to improve their social status to assess themselves. (Billig, 2001/02). They become a system within a system, incorporating some experiences and rejecting others.

   Looking at the problem of belonging from a systemic viewpoint emphasizes that there are no easy answers. However there are many points of impact. The beginning point is to design a school vision with the active participation of parents, teachers and the community. Utilize available data in decision making and design new evaluation instruments. If the existing administrator does not have the expertise necessary to design valid research studies, outside professional assistance should be made available by the
district, the PTA or community agencies or academic institutions who possess that level of expertise.

Creating a school culture that is caring, safe, respectful and where students feel accepted requires a visionary leader. The leader must involve all participants in creating the vision. Acknowledging barriers to communication and developing a response to overcome them would be one of the initial tasks. Once a vision is developed, the leader must implement the vision. This might involve recruiting faculty that is representative of the student body. Community organizations may play a large role in making this option a reality by offering assistance with the identification and recruitment process. In particular, racial and ethnic organizations may have more success marketing a community to its members than a school does. Leaders must establish quality program evaluation by developing the skills or asking for assistance. Finally leaders must be willing to redirect resources in response to data driven decisions.

Teachers must establish relationships with students and families and be willing to examine their own perceptions of people who are different. Of course, student belonging is one part of the larger goal of academic success. A student may have a well-developed sense of belonging and fail to achieve academically. Therefore teachers must also incorporate instructional learning strategies. By working with students one-on-one or in small groups to develop competency, they may also begin to develop relationships with individual students. Awareness that students observe differences in fairness and are alienated when they perceive unfairness will help teachers to become more aware of their interactions with students.

Parents must develop advocacy skills and become active participants in planning.
They must step outside of their own comfort zones to assist their sons and daughters in developing a feeling of belonging. Parents may begin by relying on the community organizations representing them to offer instruction on ways they can offer assistance to schools in communication and planning. With enough practice, parents will develop the skills and confidence necessary to interact with the schools. Finally, community organizations must become legitimate partners with schools to serve students and families. By implementing a systems view of belonging, a complex issue can be broken down into manageable goals and success can be achieved.

In summary, an educational leader must possess a plethora of superior abilities and moral fiber. To effectively lead a successful learning community, four critical elements—integrity, collaboration, emotional competence and belonging are sure to be among those qualities included.

The things we say and do influence those around us. If the influence is positive, others usually respond to it and together we can affect change. One person can make a difference in a child’s life. As an administrator, I will devote myself to being such a person—one who recognizes the potential life-long impact on future generations of young men and women.
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