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**AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP  
IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT**

by  
LeRoi Royal Jones

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of the of Educational Leadership  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
at  
Rowan University  
March 4, 2011

Dissertation Chair: James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedication this body of work to my mother, Patricia Jones, whose constant belief facilitated this great accomplishment. Mom, thanks for believing that I could have the moon. It is important to highlight my brothers and sisters as this is a collective achievement. They are: Teresa Lynch, Denise Lynch, George Lynch, Carl Jones, Brenda Jones and Jerry Ballard who have been pillars of support during this process. To my son, Lantz Jones, whose patience and unwavering support of his father has been stoic. To my best friend Joseph Tobin, thank you for your commitment to friendship and support in this process. To my fiancée Diana who has endured lonely weekends and sleepless nights. You have been inspirational and encouraging. To my daughter, Taya Jones, for her smiles at the end of many hard and frustrating

## **Acknowledgments**

It is with great appreciation that I extend my thanks to the many people who have made this research meaningful. I would like to thank the members of my committee Dr. Coaxum, Dr. Sernak, and Dr. Walpole for their support, valuable constructive criticism, and meaningful feedback throughout my experience. I would like to thank Dr. Sheree Alexander for her endless support throughout the doctoral experience and for not letting me quit on myself. You are true friend and colleague that positively impacted my life. To Dr. Arthur Waltz for his kindness, support, and words of encouragement through my leadership experience.

## **Abstract**

LeRoi Royal Jones  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP  
IN AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT  
2011

James Coaxum, III, Ph.D.  
Doctorate in Educational Leadership

This research represents an extremely personalized account of the complicated field of educational leadership and analysis of my journey through two very different alternative education environments. I documented my leadership experience for this self study to further understand how my leadership impacted two alternative educational settings. Through the vantage point of my lens, I documented and recorded my experiences through artifacts, a digital journal, and personal documentation as an administrator using the qualitative method of autoethnography. This type of qualitative research brings the reader inside of my personal experiences as an administrator. Every school district has its own climate and culture. My evaluation through the methodology of autoethnography illustrated the complexities I faced as an administrator. My leadership experiences, personal challenges, faculty interactions, and how central office administration supported and challenged my leadership as an administrator in two different alternative educational settings were documented through my lived experiences as an educational leader.

Through my analysis I experienced the political, cultural, and ethical perceptions as the self researcher investigating my leadership, which challenged me to reflect on my decisions that ultimately affected students. My analysis provided me with a profound

understanding that leaders need support from central office to develop and continually build upon the organizational objectives such as positive school culture, caring teachers, and an environment conducive to learning, which were embedded in my educational mission. Leadership from my lens offered me the opportunity to foster change that was meaningful, which positively impacted students. I was able to grow professionally when support for my educational vision was realized and understood, however, the lack of support drastically changed my leadership focus. Within these two educational academic settings my focus shifted from changing the culture and setting high expectations for all students during my leadership experience at Wood Beach Alternative High School, to protecting the basic rights of students who I was responsible for educating during my tenure at Mountain View Alternative High School and the unethical behaviors from faculty and central office administration.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction and Problem Statement**

If we are to move beyond the boundaries that have limited the possibilities for both teachers and students for far too long, we must encourage the involvement of school leadership to adjust the cognitive perspective within which problems are perceived (Eliss, Grant & Haniford, 2007). School leaders in many cases are enthusiastic, optimistic, and eager to promote a healthy learning environment for students. However, with encroaching political and community pressures on school boards, and ultimately on school administrators, principals are increasingly caught in the battle of power and control over decisions based on educational issues influenced by externally driven agendas (Meyer & Rowan, 1983). In spite of competing agendas, the function of educators is to produce highly educated students who can function in a technologically advanced society. Children need a balance of parental nurturing, supportive teachers, and responsible school leaders to meet their educational needs. It is important for school leaders to actively engage students in the education process while considering the needs of the whole child. Therefore, the relationship between parents, teachers, and school administrators must be interconnected to ensure student achievement and ultimately, life long success.

As the impact of leadership on student achievement has become increasingly evident, policymakers have simultaneously placed greater pressures on administrators. School leaders strive toward higher educational achievement for students in an effort to make our society more technologically sound and globally competitive. School leaders

are expected to increase test scores, implement new programs, and revamp old antiquated curricula which has been proven to be ineffective (Fullan, 2007). The level of increasing accountability placed on school administrators has made them vulnerable to a line of questioning by parents, community stakeholders, state, and federal agencies looking for answers when students fail to meet their academic potential. The role of an administrator exceeds standard practice of the past. In a twenty-first century educational paradigm, administrators are becoming inundated with a wider scope of responsibilities such as meeting new state mandates, providing cutting edge curriculum, and supporting teacher and student needs (Fullan, 2007).

Inevitably, the role of principals has swelled to include a confounding array of professional responsibilities that involves the consideration of environmental and development factors impacting academic performance in and outside the classroom. For example, Kaplan, Liu and Kaplan (2001) contend that the primary component that affects student success is parents' beliefs and values regarding education. Additionally, there is evidence supporting students' vulnerability to academic challenges when exposed to familial stressors at a younger age as opposed to experiencing them as teenagers, which appears to have a greater effect on academic performance (Alexander, Entwisle, & Holmes, 1997). As a result, school leaders are responsible to provide a quality education and build parental networks that offer support and encourage support amongst parents. Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations and communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates

and initiatives (Peterson, 2002). In addition, principals are expected to serve the often conflicting needs and interests of many stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, district office officials, and members of the larger community. As a result, many scholars and practitioners argue that the job requirements far exceed the reasonable capacities of any one person. The challenges of the job have changed so that traditional methods of preparing administrators are no longer adequate to meet the leadership challenges that exist in the public school setting (Peterson, 2002).

For those trained from a more traditional administrator paradigm, current challenges can be daunting and lead to frustration. School leaders are challenged to develop new strategies, implement the skills necessary for change, and meet the state and federal educational proficiencies. In order to begin to change the culture of education and meet the ever changing and complex needs of students, it is necessary for school administrators to value and continually engage in the process of self reflective practice.

This dissertation is designed to provide a detailed account of my autoethnographic research project in which I critically evaluated the outcomes of my leadership to improve upon my approach as an administrator. Throughout this journey, I documented my experiences within a political, highly stressful, yet rewarding occupation that provided me with a better understanding of the challenges faced in my profession.

This includes a detailed account of my successes and failures, from a task oriented and emotional perspective, in my role as an instructional leader in two settings including an adult and alternative high school. The adult high school accommodated the educational needs of those who dropped out of a traditional academic setting. The alternative high

school addressed the educational needs of students from their home district because the sending district was not able to effectively meet their educational and behavioral needs.

Most children, including those considered at risk, begin school enthusiastic, optimistic, and eager to learn. However, valuing school, conforming to school routines, and academic success can spiral downward the longer children are exposed to negative school experiences (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). This trend can be remedied through effective school leadership. For example, one approach to mediating negative school experiences and positively impacting students academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally is by empowering teachers. Instructional leaders are well positioned to implement strategies, such as identifying professional development workshops for teachers, which can be implemented to interrupt negative school experiences and evaluated to determine best practices that will ultimately benefit students. Effective school leaders need to be able to evaluate programming from both an individual and systems perspective to strategically determine the best means for intervention and prevention. This requires administrators to embrace a leadership style that is fluid and the confidence to use this fluidity to refine practices to better meet the needs of students.

When learning organizations are not effective in maximizing academic achievement, the school leader may need to take an introspective look at his or her leadership style to begin the process of change (Sergiovanni, 1994). An introspective approach to facilitating change multisystemically begins with those charged with the responsibility of leading an educational organization. It has been found that the factors that most impact a school leader's ability to promote change includes teacher attitudes,



personal philosophy regarding education, and the specific strategies identified to foster student growth (Fullan, 2007). Further, successfully intervening in these areas to promote positive change is contingent upon a leader's ability to serve as a change agent and the receptivity of the faculty in the process. Assuming an introspective approach as a leader can assist in promoting change, particularly when striving to create shared vision.

Creating a vision can serve as a catalyst that can move the culture of an organization in the direction that is charted by the instructional leader. However, building consensus amongst members of an organization can pose a significant challenge to leadership (Fullan, 2007). For example, facilitating needed change amongst teachers takes courage, persistence and patience, in part because some teachers believe that their instructional strategies are adequate and effective and do not see the flaws that have become daily practice. Veteran teachers who have been in education for many years have experienced a myriad of professional development in-services, reoccurring best practice approaches, and instructional strategies that are supposed to positively impact student behavior and academic performance, but these new strategies fall by the wayside and become useless, ineffective, and ultimately forgotten. Creating buy in and consensus around a vision can be achieved through a thoughtful introspective process guided by a school leader. Through this process, faculty can develop the capacity for a deeper understanding of the need for change, permeating deeper held beliefs and facilitating motivation to change current ineffective practices. A leadership approach led by introspective practice provides a roadmap for meaningful and longstanding change.

## **Purpose of Study**

This autoethnographic study allowed me to conduct an introspective analysis of my leadership style including the challenges I face as an administrator and the effects of my decision making in the settings where I worked. The ongoing and critical evaluation of my leadership practice provided an in depth understanding as to how I failed and succeeded in meeting the needs of students, teachers, staff and the school community as a whole. During the process I was driven by my unwavering belief that it is critical to address the needs of students in order to develop adults who can successfully compete in society. I was equally driven by my other core, yet parallel, belief that it is critical to continually refine my skills and abilities as a leader so that I, too, can become a competitive and effective leader in society. In doing so, my experiences were evaluated through reflective practice and led me to a better understanding of my educational leadership potential.

Reflective practice seeks to identify, assess, and change underlying beliefs and assumptions as well as the theories-in-use which directly influence actions (Osterman & Kott Kamp 1993). This study positioned me as the researcher and the primary data source and provided vivid accounts of the issues that have impacted me as an educational leader in two alternative academic environments. According to Patton (2002) autoethnographic accounts have been found under an array of names, they include personal narratives, personal ethnographies, lived experience and ethnographic memoirs. Narratives are part of the researcher's story when focusing on cultural phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) report that narratives are stories that create the effect of reality by illuminating characters embedded in the complexities of moments of struggle.

Narratives are intended to be pure accounts not influenced by interpretation, fragmentation, and marginalization ultimately allowing for a more genuine and meaningful analysis of experience. Personal ethnographies are creative narratives shaped out of a researcher's personal experiences within a culture (Goddall, 2000).

The focus of this study was to illuminate how I, as a school leader, analyzed, interpreted, and reacted to the internal issues related to an alternative educational environment to gain a greater understanding of myself and my leadership practice. Osterman and Kottkamp (2003) assert that through reflective practice "...a more optimistic perspective toward change can take place: Organizational change is possible and individuals have the power to create it" (p.5). Through this ethnographic approach I was able to closely examine the challenges I encountered, related successes and failures, and to ultimately learn how my leadership experiences influenced my professional growth.

To protect the confidentiality of the two alternative educational settings in which I worked I used pseudonyms. In this study I reflected on my work as a Principal of the Wood Beach Alternative High School (Wood Beach) and the Mountain View Alternative High School (Mountain View). Wood Beach was an alternative high school in need of leadership that could promote an environment that supported and valued students. My experience at Wood Beach was greatly enriched by the support of the Superintendent, who valued and supported my approach as an educational leader. On the other hand, Mr. Curtis the Assistant Superintendent at Mountain View did not value my leadership philosophy in an alternative high school where students were placed as a result of negative behaviors exhibited in their traditional academic setting. In order to gain a

deeper understanding of my lived leadership experience, I developed research questions that guided the direction of my autoethnographic research analysis.

### **Research Questions**

Every school district is different and has a unique culture and environment. An introspective evaluation directed by the methodology of an autoethnography enhanced my understanding of the process of change and helped to shape my professional and personal growth. Examining myself through a reflective lens provided me the opportunity to explore my leadership, enabling me to grow and reflect personally and professionally. In doing so, I was able to shed light on the experiences that face school administrators in the twenty-first century educational environment. Leading faculty, students, and communicating effectively with parents encouraged me to reflect on my decisions. My research questions gave me a framework to pursue a deeper analysis of the key elements associated with creating effective and meaningful change as a school leader. The research questions that guided my autoethnography include:

1. How did the use of reflective practice bring clarity to my leadership development while leading in an alternative high school environment?
2. How did my leadership theory in practice impact the alternative high school environments?
3. How did the climate and culture impact my leadership development?
4. How was the autoethnographic research design a useful technique for examining my leadership theory?

## **Significance of the Study**

It was my expectation that this study will enlighten present and future contemporaries to reflect on their personal journey in educational leadership and to communicate that leadership is characterized by life long learning that is filled with triumphs and setbacks. In my journey, articulated in this autoethnography, it was, and continues to be, important for me to promote student advocacy, nurture faculty, and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and the professional growth of the field (Fullan, 2007). The challenges of being an effective school leader and learner in both traditional and alternative educational settings are demanding, and the boundaries of responsibility are constantly widening. Despite the continuous evolution of the field, my hope is that this study will provide colleagues with a blueprint to reflect on their own journey as school administrators, whether or not it parallels my personal experiences.

Most students enter school with the desire to achieve. However, teachers are uncertain about how to positively influence a diverse group of learners and often question whether or not they are having an impact as educational leaders (Fullan, 2007). Students facing challenges may have been detoured, discouraged, or labeled as struggling learners. In many cases students enter the classroom eager to learn and, if their initial educational interaction from the teacher does not engage the students, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information (Fullan, 2007). Negative student-teacher relationships, prompted by feelings of inadequacy and frustration on the part of students and faculty, can further strengthen a student's decision to leave a traditional education setting (Sergiovanni, 1994). Despite a desire to learn, students attending alternative education

programs are typically unable to successfully meet the academic requirements of a traditional educational environment. Students who are disengaged from school feel that leaving the traditional school will relieve the stress associated with their educational experience (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Through my leadership analysis, I explored the issues that have historically led to the marginalization of the alternative education population and attempted to develop a leadership philosophy aimed at supporting and re-igniting the fervor these children once possessed for education. There are many problems facing alternative learners in public education such as family issues, past educational failures, and teacher-student relationships. Through my analysis, I attempted to provide a template to address these challenges and facilitate the improvement of education for students in an alternative education setting. My goal was to provide a glimpse into the life of alternative learners and the leadership needed to support them on their non-traditional educational journey. Administrators and teachers are followers of the dream to implement quality education and are committed to making their efforts a reality (Sergiovanni, 1994). However, leadership can pull on an innumerable array of emotions, promoting a drive for self reflection. This can serve as the impetus for the development and refinement of a person's leadership philosophy. Korthagen (2001) conceptualizes reflective practice as a means for professional change, citing a clear distinction between action, learning, and reflection. School leaders need to continually promote change in order to increase positive academic behaviors such as healthy teacher student interactions, which reflect academic mastery of curricula content that leads to graduation. The institution of education and my lived experiences shaped my leadership as an instructional leader.

To further understand my espoused leadership theory, it was important to provide a personal summary of my life experiences and how these experiences have shaped my leadership. My life journey has provided a foundation as to why I value education, nurtured my unwavering belief that every student can achieve, and ignited my passion to inspire others. My experience as a student motivated me to challenge myself to become a life long learner. I was always behind my peers academically and worked hard to compete in the classroom. My experiences reveal success, failure, and tragedy and these experiences, individually and collectively, have served in solidifying my leadership platform. This study brings a unique perspective to the daily decisions I made as a school administrator and the interactions that I encountered as a result of the expectations of the central office, faculty, and students.

## **Chapter II**

### **Leadership Platform**

Leadership is not only about making clever decisions; it is also the process of energizing other people to make good decisions, enhancing productivity and passion about their craft (Bolman & Deal, 2003). In other words, it is about serving as a plateau for people to step off and realize their own self worth. It is my belief that leadership develops from a series of personal experiences that shape the ethics, morality, and integrity of the world in which we live. As I discovered my leadership style, I began to peek through the lens of reflective practice to determine my power as a leader. Leading an organization that is committed to caring for students personifies my espoused theoretical philosophy.

Leadership from my perspective is the ability to understand the current issues, concerns, beliefs, and values of an organization. This understanding must be present before a plan for change can take place. Leaders who are reflective and attuned to themselves and others are able to diagnose the organizational culture (Boyatzis & Mckee, 2005). The formula for educational change can be illusive and inconspicuous, so the lens for change must be flexible in order to see the many components that make a whole organization. Organizations are most efficient and effective when there are shared values and goals. Fullan (2007) gracefully describes an instructional leader as “One who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner” (p. 294).



Sergiovanni's (1994) perspective has evolved from the traditional educational paradigm which he describes as formal, relationship free, and detached from the ever changing student population and has moved toward a school culture where there is a predominate emphasis on community. This perspective has provoked new thinking and strategies for leaders, teachers, and students. Within this paradigm, Sergiovanni (1994) asserts that a new set of organizational beliefs that nurture a school community can promote values which lead to social, emotional well being and educational achievement.

My leadership has evolved and been shaped by various experiences as an instructional leader in two non-traditional schooling environments. The complexities that emerged while leading within these organizations have had a significant impact on my leadership development and upon my personal identity. My intent was to share my professional experiences in an effort to better understand how leadership emerges, changes, and transforms while a leader is immersed in the challenges of educational leadership. Further, I have shared significant personal experiences including life lessons modeled by significant people in my life that helped to shape my passion for education. My espoused leadership is directly linked and related to the personal and professional experiences described herein thereby making the autoethnographic approach ideal for sharing my professional growth as a leader.

### **Personal Experiences**

During the 1980s, drugs emerged as a significant problem in my home town and many of my friends became entangled in the web of the drug trade. The life of a drug dealer was glamorized on the streets as great times, fast money, and social respect. I have wondered what it would be like to embrace that life style. At the time of my internal

deliberation whether to make the streets a full time job my father was battling cancer and eventually lost his fight. The only thing I knew about my father was that he was a talented saxophone player. People that I have never met knew more about my father than I did. My father used music as an outlet to cope with stress and the pressures of life, and I had football. I was a talented football player that was highly recruited by many colleges in high school so I decided to enter college instead of the streets. Football was the venue that grounded me as a person, student, and athlete. Following my high school graduation I decided to attend the University of Fairway to further my education and athletic career. It was a tough decision because the University did not offer me a scholarship and I was more than a thousand miles away from my home and my family. Given I wanted to come home, my high school football coach told me that he would make assist me getting into another university closer to home. During my freshmen year of college at the University of Fairway, I was home sick and was looking forward to going home and visiting with friends and family over the holidays. I had heard that Coach Lewis was not feeling well and some of my teammates and I went to see him in the hospital. We heard from Coach Sullivan, our assistant coach, that he was diagnosed with leukemia. We went to see him at a hospital in Philadelphia where they specialize in leukemia treatment. The room was white with bland curtains that looked like coffee was poured on them. Mrs. Lewis was in the room and greeted us with a smile, but we could all see that beneath her grin was a profound sadness.

As we walked toward his bedside he was up and alert and the first question out of his mouth was, “How are your grades?” We all replied “fine” and he told us to sit down. He looked at us with a genuine gaze and said “I don’t know what is going to happen but I

did not work this hard for you to quit on yourselves. Make sure that you get your education.” We all replied with a synchronized monotone voice, “We will.” He reassured us that he would be fine and to finish college. As I was returning from Thanksgiving break I received a call from my wrestling coach, Danny George, who shared that Coach Lewis was terminally ill. On Monday, November 26, 1990 Coach Lewis died due to complications related to leukemia. When Coach Lewis died I lost both a father figure and mentor. I also felt like I lost my direction. I did not know what to do about my college future. I stayed at Fairway for two years and quit school in the fall of 1992 and returned home. During that time, I was a homesick, heavy drinker with no future. I started feeling like I was forgotten, washed up, and old at the age of twenty. One day while in my bedroom feeling sorry for myself watching music videos, my mother banged on my door as if the police were down stairs for me. I said “Ma, what’s wrong?” She said a coach from some school in South Jersey was on the phone and wanted to talk to me. They wanted to know if I was interested in finishing my college career as a student athlete. At the time, I was not excited about the game and was depressed. I felt defeated and dejected about school. After recounting my high school friends talk about high school as if it was the last time they were ever going to play football, I realized that the phone call was an opportunity for me to finish what I had started. This was my second chance to have the life I wanted. During the summer of 1993, I enrolled at Rantz University.

As I reflect on my successes and failures as a student athlete, I remember trying to inspire players through encouragement and support, which was something that I had not experienced at the University of Fairway. I can recall having that feeling when I was at Fairway and how hard I had to fight everyday to compete for playing time. At Rantz

University I started right away and the team voted me captain. My coaches at Rantz believed in my ability as an athlete and conveyed this to me on and off the field. They told me that I could contribute right away and could be an influential player. For the first time in my life, I truly began to believe in myself. During my first year at Rantz we were able to play in the national championship. We lost, but I was grateful for the opportunity to play for a national championship. In order to make sure that winning remained a priority for the players; our coaches held extra practices and showcased films of the opposing teams after practice. The coaches expected the leaders of the team to embrace an attitude of hope and commitment and display it in their behavior. Sergiovanni (1994) argues that leaders within the context of any organization must try to make their fellow constituents aware that they are all stakeholders in a conjoint activity that cannot succeed without their involvement and commitment.

Every year my goal as a football player was to make it to the national championship. I realized that supporting and mentoring my teammates would promote cohesion and hard work. As I reflect on my relationship with my teammates, I feel that they believed in my approach because of our tremendous ability to work together. My educational and athletic drive was shaped by the values and consistent support of my coaches and the relationship with my teammates. But who I am at the core of my being was a direct result of my mother. My leadership style is directly related to the life lessons my mother modeled for me. Like many of my life changing decisions, my choice to stay in school was directly related to my mother's moral philosophy. This allowed me to avail myself of opportunities outside my family of origin. My mother consistently conveyed to me that anything is possible with hard work and dedication.

## **Parental Leadership**

My mother was pivotal in nurturing the foundation for my leadership approach. She had some advantages by being a White woman until her employers saw her children. My mother lost jobs because of the diversity of her children. She never gave excuses and turned negative situations into positives by finding new places of employment. I always wondered why she did not try to hide us from employers. She said “Society will catch up to the ideas of humanism”. As I got older, I realized that despite what other people said, she loved us and she was proud of us. Benjamin (1990) asserts that “There shall be no compromise on matters of ethical importance” (p. 12). My mother stood alone, yet strong, in a time when racial tension was high and inter-racial marriages were controversial. But her attitude and struggle earned her respect from the community because as she put it, “They don’t have to like me, but they will definitely respect me.” My mother was a hard working, caring woman who worked at protecting her integrity at all cost. For example, one of the clients that my mother worked for had expensive jewelry. My mother would request that the family remove any valuables from the home so that there would not be any reason for accusatory comments or problems. She knew that she had to protect her income and did not want to be labeled a thief or liar. In the private duty business nurses are hired by “word of mouth.” In the twenty-five years she worked as a nurse she was never accused of stealing, mistreatment of a patient, or failure to report to work regularly and punctual. It was through her understanding of people and the fact that she never lost sight of her objectives that she was able to promote a positive environment for her patients. In my mother’s eyes her hard work and persistence could not falter- the stakes were too high.

Similarly, everything that I have accomplished was done with hard work. I was never the smartest or brightest, yet I always found a way to achieve. Once when I was in elementary school, I failed a test twice and I was afraid that my mother would view me as a failure. Later that day when I arrived home from school, I realized that the teacher had already called to tell my mother the news. She called me into the kitchen to talk to me about the test. I will always remember what my mother said “Failure happens son...however; it is what you do after you fail that will reveal your true character.” My mother consistently conveyed to me that effort and hard work go further than just talent. I have used this piece of wisdom throughout my life.

That same year I was acknowledged by the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity for my academic accomplishments. I was a special education student struggling to read and when I found out that I was going to be given an award for academics I was shocked. When I was called on stage to receive the award, I remained seated because I thought that the principal had made a mistake. Mrs. Freedman, my fourth grade special education teacher encouraged me to go to the stage. The speaker spoke about a concept called hard work. I will never forget what he said. “There are students in this room that earned the right to be here whether it was by academic achievement, hard work in education or a combination of both. Nobody today or from this day forward can ever take this accomplishment away from you.” I felt powerful, confused, and excited all at the same time. Later that night when I got home from the awards ceremony, I was telling my brothers, Carl and George, all about the ceremony. I asked “Is that true that you can go far in life if you work hard?” They said, “Yes, it can get you a better life, so go to bed and keep working hard.” From that day forward I began to fully believe that anything is

possible. Thinking beyond the boundaries of report cards allowed me to start dreaming about my future potential. Through my experiences in life I matured with the understanding that anything is possible.

I have learned many lessons from my mother that have shaped my leadership, however it was her final lesson that taught me to face adversity regardless of the outcome. My mother was diagnosed with a rare cancer, and her doctor told her that radiation therapy would be her best option for recovery. As a nurse who had cared for the terminally ill, my mother had seen first hand the atrocious effects of treatment and decided not to seek radiation therapy. She did this knowing that without radiation therapy, she would face death. My mother also knew that she would die savoring her final moments with dignity. Her tremendous courage and bravery drove me to push myself even harder.

### **First Professional Experience**

After my mother died, I realized that the world can be a cruel place and to cherish every day because tomorrow is never promised. I was twenty-six years old, a single parent, and only had a bachelor's degree in psychology. I was struggling to find my professional identity. I applied for a job working with at-risk teenagers for the Department of Law and Public Safety in 1997. I took the job in order for my son to have quality health benefits and to make a difference in the lives of at-risk teenagers. I was new to the job and wanted to learn about the staff culture. One evening after work I was invited to have a drink with my colleagues at a nearby bar. I started to meet with my co-workers outside of work to discuss the issues and norms of the organization. We also talked about where we came from, shared acquaintances, and other common interests.

As we began to feel more comfortable with one another I began to share programmatic ideas for increasing staff morale, productivity, and the quality of work. For example, I suggested that management employ rotating shifts so the veteran staff could spend more time with their families and attend an annual staff outing. They said they would look into the ideas, not shortly but surely. I worked the mid-night shift on the weekends and an eight to four during the week, so that I would have more time with my son. After several months, my colleagues valued my abilities as a counselor because I was able to resonate with our students and develop a professional culture that was supportive. During the midnight shifts, my co-workers and I would often discuss current events, our personal problems, and what we hoped to do in the future. I was explaining to Fred, who had been working for the organization for nine years, that if you want to get somewhere in this world you have to work for it. He replied “Yeah, I didn’t know we had to work this hard.” As we laughed at life’s challenges we both agreed that we wanted more out of life. We also felt passionate about affecting the lives of our residents.

My primary focus was to create positive opportunities for the residents that would sustain a healthy life style. I had high hopes of changing the world, but I soon realized that sometimes the world does not want to change. I spent about five years working for the state, and I made a difference in the lives of two teenagers. Some could argue that my success average is low and, if they looked at the numbers then, they would be right. However, when I looked deeper I realized that I made the world a better place because of my impact on two teenagers. Chi, as he liked to be called, was a drug dealer who was arrested for weapons’ possession and narcotics. Dellean was a smart student who was arrested for drugs and possession of a hand gun.



Dellean entered the program as a senior in high school and when I received a copy of his transcript he was taking college prep classes. I thought it would be a good idea to expose Dellean to college applications in an effort to get him thinking about a post secondary education. He was thinking about college and talked about playing soccer at the college level. Dellean was sentenced to eighteen months with a chance of release after thirteen months if he was making progress academically, socially, and emotionally. Dellean told me that he wanted to take the SAT exam and began the application process for college admission. We identified five schools which included, Rutgers University, Kean University, Stevens Institute of Technology, Montclair University, and University of Connecticut. He was accepted into Rutgers, Kean, and Montclair. When I received the news, I met with Dellean and told him that he was given a second chance. He said "Mr. J, what are you talking about?" I stated, "You have been accepted into three colleges and the parole is willing to let you leave early if I can get you registered for summer classes. The only question is where do you want to attend college?" Dellean stated that he wanted to attend Kean University because it was a small school and had a competitive science program. Dellean was ecstatic, and I asked my supervisor for approval to take Dellean to Kean and to assist him with the registration process. He told me that I could use the company van to transport Dellean as soon as possible. Two days later, I was at Kean University and Dellean was registering for college. After he registered, we went out for lunch at a local Burger King. After sitting down to eat I noticed a tear running down Dellean's face. I asked him "What is wrong?" Dellean replied "Thanks to you Mr. J., I have a chance at life and I won't let you down." Dellean was released from the program and began his life as a college student. Currently he is working on his master's degree.

Chi was arrested for possession of narcotics and followed a different path to college. He was reading on a seventh grade level and dropped out of high school to sell drugs. While Chi was in the program, we began to focus on his future. After being in the program for three months he expressed an interest in going to college. Chi said “Mr. J, I hear that you can make things happen?” I replied, “Chi, you need to graduate high school before I can make anything happen.” He answered with a confident tone “I will Mr. J!” Apparently he was serious because I heard from other residents that he was taking textbooks to the dormitory to read. I followed up with Chi later that day and asked him, “Have you been studying at night?” He said “Mr. J if you take me to my dorm I will show you.” Sure enough he had an algebra book, history book, and a SAT prep book that Dellean left behind. I said “Okay Chi I see that you are trying and I think that you need to pass the HSPA exam in March before you start thinking about college.” High School Proficiency Assessment is a state wide exam that all high school students have to pass in order to graduate. Again, he responded with a confident yet poised voice “No doubt Mr. J”. At the end of May, Chi’s HSPA results were in and he met the state requirements for math and language arts. To pass the HSPA you need a score of two hundred or better in both math and language arts to graduate from high school.

Chi was scheduled to take the GED exam the following week. I explained, “Chi if you pass I will make sure I get you into college,” and he responded with the same confident tone. The following week Chi was returning from his GED exam as I arrived for my shift. As I exited my car, I heard, “Do your thing Mr. J it’s a rap!” I waited for him so that we could enter the main office because I wanted to talk to him. I asked “Chi, would you move to another state to go to college?” He responded “Mr. J to get out of my

town I would move to another country”. I informed him that there was a college in Ohio that would support his academic needs. Wilberforce University is a historically black university and I believed that Chi would benefit from the class size and moving far away from his home town where drugs, guns, and violence has impeded his education. I also informed him that I scheduled a testing date for the SAT exam in November so that he would have time to work with the math and English teacher prior to the test.

In January Chi’s results arrived. He scored a 980 out of 1600. I was so proud of him that I spoke to the Program Administrator and asked him if I could buy Chi a celebratory cake for his hard work. He approved and Chi celebrated with his teachers and the staff. In February, we sent out his application packet to five schools which included Wilberforce University, Kean University, Stockton State College, Delaware State, and William Patterson University. Chi was accepted to Wilberforce and Kean, and decided to attend Wilberforce because he use to sell drugs a few blocks away from the Kean campus. In May he received his acceptance letter to Wilberforce University and entered college that summer similar to Dellean.

To date, both students graduated college and are doing well. Dellean decided to pursue a career in medicine and Chi is currently working with at-risk students in Ohio. These students exemplify what can happen when students feel someone believes in them. Chi and Dellean taught me that anything is possible if support and encouragement is present in the lives of our lost and vulnerable youth. This experience motivated me to continue trying to make the world a better place by becoming an instructional leader for students.

## **Espoused Leadership**

Leadership does not have one set formula to solve problems and to effectively address organizational issues. My espoused leadership platform is comprised of transactional, transformational, servant, and social justice leadership theories, pillars upon which I stand in order to embark upon the challenges facing school administration. My espoused leadership grew out of a myriad of past personal experiences which I will use to guide my future experiences as I continue to stretch and grow through reflective practice. My choices as a leader are shaped by past experiences and circumstances as a student who did not necessarily thrive within a traditional educational environment. These past experiences, which evoke emotions, personal reflection, and sometimes doubt, when coupled with my espoused leadership theory have enabled me to grow as an administrator within a non-traditional educational environment.

## **Transactional Leadership**

Burns (1978) describes transactional leadership as the ability to motivate followers through an exchange of rewards for services rendered. The essence of transactional leadership is embedded within the interactions of those possessing various levels of motivations, power, potential, and skill, in pursuit of a common or joint purpose (Burns, 1978). I espouse a transactional leadership approach to education as a way to ensure my faculty completed tasks, was punctual, and adhered to organizational policy in response to receiving monetary rewards. In these terms, compliance has less to do with one's commitment as it does with accountability. Transactional leaders are sometimes referred to as "benevolent dictators" who direct organizations through heroic and charismatic efforts. Often though, the organizational culture remains tacit and hidden,

controlled by the leader. Transactional leadership is an instrument that I used to unify the behaviors of my staff such as following policy, contractual responsibilities, and the expectations that were established by the school district. Education is a community institution with similar characteristics embedded in our current democracy which embodies a transactional leadership philosophy and often operates by checks and balances that may have little to do with intrinsic value, morality, or need (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998).

Transactional leadership monitors for compliance, evaluates performance, and reduces behaviors that deviate from the established rules and regulations (Bass, 1985). I found that transactional leadership is a way to evaluate how well people follow directions. Transactional leadership provides structure that allows for appropriate behavior within an organization, however, it does not inspire personal ownership and intrinsic motivation.

Adherence to moral standards and rules furthermore reflects the ethical stance associated with a leader who exhibits idealized behavior and also provides associates with values with which they can identify (Bass, 1990). A sense of responsibility also reflects the dedication that inspires associates to share the leader's vision and goals. Clarity in terms of goals and the roles of associates in achieving them are requirements for both inspirational motivation and idealized behaviors. However, a preference for the structure provided by guidelines and adherence to regulations are also related to a contingent reward strategy and the use of active management by exception. The responsibility is placed squarely on the professional shoulders of the instructional leader

and without a check and balance system in place I would have difficulty a culture which reflects my vision. A transactional leadership approach is necessary to develop change.

Change, according to Burns (1978), means to "...substitute one thing for another, to give and take, to exchange places, to pass from one place to another..." (p.24).

Leading from a transactional perspective encompasses redirecting behaviors through policy and sanctions. Within a transactional paradigm, Burns (2003) argues that to transform something means to initiate change without the input, opinions, and perceptions of members in the organization. Specifically, the transactional leader does not waiver on the fundamental objective of the organization. In an organization, according to Argyris (1990), individuals will polarize toward sub-groups that share similar ideologies. The basic approach of transactional leadership does not allow for collaboration, support, or inspiration. This autoethnographic process helped me to examine and understand the fear and resistance associated with the transactional leadership model.

Leading from a transactional frame I focused on compliance in return for an expected reward (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Building administrators who lead from this perspective are interested in the completion of tasks they deem as important. Therefore, as Boyatzis and McKee (2005) point out, many educational organizations following this model have tunnel vision and their leaders become stuck in a cycle of sacrifices and dissonance, easily camouflaged by transactional leadership. Soley focusing on teacher compliance with district policy, contractual obligations, and completion of daily responsibilities depleted my day of any meaningful initiatives. On the other hand, it assisted me in identifying those who were not committed and only compliant because of

the threat of personal accountability if they did not conform. Additionally, I found that other faculty, regardless of the intended or perceived outcomes, would only put forth a minimal effort. Many organizations that are embedded in a bureaucratic process require checks and balances to ensure the organizational process works effectively. Transactional leadership behaviors (Bass, 1985) are aimed at monitoring and controlling employees through rational or economic means. Contingent reward refers to leadership behaviors focused on exchange of resources. Leaders provide support, resources, and opportunities to teachers to engage students in the educational process.

Management by exception actively refers to monitoring performance and taking corrective action as necessary. The focus of management by omission is to set standards and monitor deviations from the standard. In the less active version of management by exception Burns (1978) posits that leaders take a passive approach, intervening only when problems become serious. Although organizations embedded in a transactional philosophy work from an extrinsic perspective, I believe that transforming an organization intrinsically is more effective in achieving optimal results and in changing the overall culture (Burns, 1978). Through my autoethnography, I learned that transactional leadership had both advantages and disadvantages as an educational philosophy when used in isolation. School leaders need to have an array of styles to meet the needs the organization. Transformational leadership offers a different leadership perspective.

### **Transformational Leadership**

The original formulation of transformational leadership theory comes from Burns (1978). At the core of transformational leadership is the concept of transformation, or

change of the organization sparked by the leader but spearheaded by the entire organization. Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a process in which "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation" (p. 20). A chief element of transformation is the ability to cultivate the needs of the follower in a person-centered manner. According to Burns, focusing on individual needs holds leaders accountable to the follower. Burns further contends that followers are driven by a moral need, the need to champion a cause, or the need to take a higher moral stance on an issue. However, Tichy and Devanna (1986) assert that, "Transformational leadership is about change, innovation, and entrepreneurship" (p. viii).

In transformational leadership, the leader is expected to facilitate and initiate the organizational change, even though both the leader and the followers negotiate the vision as it is being carried out (Webb, Neumann & Jones, 2004). The shape of an organization is transformed when thinking changes (Senge, 1999). Transformational leadership facilitates a shift in thinking that is grounded in shared responsibility by the instructional leader, teachers, students, and parents, through planning, and innovative problem solving (McCrae, 1987). Transformational leaders attempt to develop innovation and create opportunity within the organization. Education is in a dire state and the traditional strategies that are intended to infuse life and vitality into the process risk stifling the educational innovation for future generations of leaders. I have come to believe that thinking creatively, and supporting others in thinking creatively, will foster a meaningful conversation which will develop a storm of innovative strategies.

I espouse transformational leadership as part of my professional practice because I believe that I can make a difference in shaping the future of education. This leadership



style has provided me with the opportunity to be open and creative as an educational leader. Transforming people who are willing to try something new with the understanding that the thermostat of change directly impacts culture can be rewarding within an educational environment. I have used this approach in developing a shared vision and by encouraging people to receive information and make meaning of it for themselves (Pidgeon, Isbell & Paige, 2006). In my experience, utilizing a transformational leadership approach can serve in enhancing productivity and in developing a healthy organizational climate through a shared sense of value. Transformational leadership facilitates change intrinsically and filters through our actions (Wheatley, 2006). Through my journey I have attempted to create a culture that moves beyond the rewards and punishments of transactional leadership and toward a culture of respect, openness, and collaboration reflected in the transformational leadership approach. School leaders are responsible for the many complexities that often overwhelm and obstruct their ability to provide opportunities for students to obtain a quality education.

Schools with a counterproductive culture are typically represented by school leaders who are dissatisfied, exhibit signs of burnout, and are unable to manage their time so as to spend most of it on their preferred tasks. They often feel overwhelmed with administrative tasks and the constant buzz of incidents and problems. As the instructional leader, I am accountable for the overall success of students, needs of teachers, and developing relationships with parents. To further support students, teachers, and parents, I must listen to their concerns in an unselfish manner and develop shared goals in which they become central to the process of professional growth. Leading from this perspective

focuses on identifying faculty needs and obtaining the resources to provide quality instruction. It is important to be flexible in developing opportunities for teachers to appropriately plan quality lessons, identify materials, and recognize professional development opportunities that promote innovative teaching strategies. It is the responsibility of the school leader to facilitate communication and collaboration in order to promote a healthy school culture.

School culture, defined as “the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, which influence their functioning at school” (Maslowski, 2001), plays a significant role in enhancing school effectiveness (Heck & Marcoulides 1996). A high commitment and high performance seem to be distinguishing features of schools with a healthy organizational culture and high staff well-being (Sergiovanni 2004). Transformational leaders have a unique opportunity to begin the process of change by encouraging faculty to embrace new levels of teaching and learning through a transformational lens. The path to success is never certain, however resources can provide direction that will enable teachers to develop strategies that will foster growth. Serving the needs of teachers can have remarkable results for student success.

Due to my willingness to take risks throughout my life, including risking failure, I was successful as an athlete, student and citizen. I believe in working outside the formal channels of bureaucratic rules and engaging in a progressive process toward meaningful change. I espouse transformational leadership because I believe that by creating new and innovative opportunities for students will provide more avenues for educational success. Howell and Higgins (1990c) assert that teachers who have high self-confidence,

persistence, and energy, take risks and explore new instructional opportunities help to create a community that stimulates school culture.

Transformational leaders must meet demands faster and better than before, given the increasingly interdependent economy (Brown, 1994). School leaders are forced to constantly change to provide effective education within shrinking budgets, and increasing responsibilities and demands. Through reflective practice, I found that despite these pressures, the transformational paradigm encouraged me to develop positive relationships with staff, which fostered meaningful student outcomes (Sergiovanni, 1994). In addition to the transactional and transformational approach to leadership, I also believe that serving my staff is an approach that I also value and embrace in my leadership style.

### **Servant Leadership**

According to Bausch (1998), leaders will need to be concurrently and successively specialists and generalists, team players and self-reliant. I am committed to serving others through a cause, a crusade, a movement, and a campaign with humanitarian, not materialistic goals (Williams, 1998). Leaders have traditionally been valued for their communication and decision making skills. Although these are also important skills for the servant-leader, they need to be reinforced by a deep commitment to listening intently to others. The servant-leader seeks to identify the will of a group and helps to clarify that will. He or she listens receptively to what is being said and not said. Listening also encompasses getting in touch with one's own inner voice. Listening, coupled with periods of reflection, is essential to the growth and well-being of the servant-leader (Hillman, 1996). My position as an educational leader often provided me the opportunity to listen and understand others as they discuss education from their

perspective. Servant leadership is a practical unselfish philosophy which supports people and leads to expanding service to individuals and institutions (Greenleaf, 1970). To foster meaningful change I have continually evaluated my leadership to improve all aspects of it. Servant leadership requires self-mastery before organizational achievement is possible (Kerfoot, 2002). Understanding my vision for change coupled with the needs of the students and teachers provided the opportunity to assess the environment which allowed me to serve through modeling, teaching, and providing relevant resources developing behaviors that positively impact school culture. Self mastery according to Kerfoot (2002) begins with an intrinsic understanding of my value system and how my unique set of principles impacts the school culture.

During my ethnographic analysis I was able to understand the challenges that were embedded in both educational settings through reflective practice. As a part of my espoused leadership theory, I was able to assess and diagnose situations and properly implement a solution that was inclusive of the faculty. It was important to learn and understand the values of the people within my organization, support their needs, and make them feel comfortable through service.

Similarly, as an instructional leader it was my responsibility to be a steward for my staff and lead through service. As a servant leader, it was my goal to advance student learning, empower staff, and support and serve those who directly effect our students. I sought to make decisions inclusively seeking the ideas of others to inform my decisions. The art of convincing those around me was the catalyst for change that is long lasting and effective. I believed that being passionate and excited about a cause is the first step in developing strategies to begin to address the institutional needs. I introduced myself as a

leader ready to lighten the burden associated with the daily challenges of teaching with altruistic components such as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, and by demonstrating a commitment to the growth of people within the organizations where I have worked (Greenleaf, 2002). The motivation to improve student performance and culture was embedded in my passionate approach geared toward creating change.

The emotions associated with serving as a means to leading are important to championing meaningful change. I embraced emotions identified by Mayer and Salovey (1997), who emphasize (a) enthusiasm, (b) optimism, (c) curiosity, (d) openness to new ideas, and (e) responsiveness to self and others. Adding to the understanding of the use of emotion, Cooper and Sawaf (1996) posit that these leader-behaviors are antecedents to facilitating trust in the leader in that followers observe and interpret the behaviors and ascribe or attribute the behaviors as indicative of fairness, consistency, and appropriateness. These five behaviors identified by Mayer and Salovey, as well as the attribution proposed by Cooper and Sawaf, tie to (a) Page and Wong's (2000) factor of integrity; (b) Patterson's (2003) factors of altruism, trust, and service to the follower; (c) Russell and Stone's (2002) factors of trust, integrity, and credibility; (d) Sendjaya and Sarros' (2002) factors of equality and trust; and (e) Winston's factors of altruism, commitment to the leader, and service.

Serving in the profession of education can benefit students, thus changing the educational culture. It is important for education to foster a caring environment. Servant leadership challenges the current positions of most leadership styles by incorporating selfless service as the primary leadership approach (Greenleaf, 1978). Leading from an

emotional paradigm guided by reflective practice, assists in aligning the feelings and emotions of the staff with the organizational objectives providing the backdrop for new educational thinking. Other characteristics associated with servant leaders are foresight, which provided me the advantage of anticipating behaviors and implementing preventative steps, listening receptively to others, and practicing stewardship by meeting the needs of the organization before meeting personal needs (Spears, 2004). I espouse servant leadership because I want to foster emotions that stimulate positive behaviors for both students and teachers which impacts school culture. Espousing servant leadership as a part of my leadership platform provided opportunities for students and faculty to identify needs and resources to further enhance the culture in my building. There are many challenges that I encountered in my various leadership positions. The most unjust, however, was the impact of the current educational system in inhibiting the development of future generations of young leaders trying to find their way in our complex twenty-first century society. To change the current educational fabric means that educational leaders must not waiver in the responsibility and commitment to advocacy.

### **Social Justice Leadership**

Social justice has become a major concern for educational scholars and school leaders in the 21st century. This concern is driven by many factors, including the growing diversity of society, their school-age populations, and the increasing awareness of student achievement. Grogan (2002) aspires for principals to “understand their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice” (p. 24). However, the question of how to accomplish this remains unanswered (Brown, 2004). Leading from a social justice paradigm means embracing school change that helps point to the necessity

of change, and helps provide the blueprint for change to happen. Social justice means advocating for marginalized students and keeping at the center of one's practice the success of all students. Furthermore, social justice in education includes eliminating that marginalization and focusing more toward inclusive classroom practice and equity (Theoharis, 2004). The evidence is clear and alarming that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis. If current and future educational leaders are to foster successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning and accountability practices for all students, then substantive changes in educational leadership preparation is required (Brown, 2004). As a school leader, developing the vocabulary, skills, and knowledge necessary to engage in substantive discussions concerning the dynamics of differences is a critical component to the preparation of leaders for social justice and equity (Brown, 2004).

In deepening and expanding the social justice discourse, some educational leadership scholars argue that race and racism in society must become a central and integral aspect of the leadership knowledge base (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2007). The social injustice that currently dwells in our schools partially has been nurtured by the high-stakes accountability movement, which has many school leaders diligently working to meet the needs of their students at the expense of attending to other, equally important issues (Larson & Ovando, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Furman (2003) noted that there is increasing attention given to social justice in education and a focus on the moral purposes of leadership in schools and how to achieve these purposes. Social justice has become so prominent a topic that Murphy (1999) recently identified it as one of

“three powerful synthesizing paradigms” (p. 54) embedded in the “shifting landscape” of education.

Bogotch (2002) states that social justice is “a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power” and the leaders for social justice must challenge structures built on objective reality. Leadership is a multifaceted position from which emotions, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication, are constantly evaluated and monitored (Ozlem & Robin, 2009). I have a vision to create an educational environment that will foster learning for all students regardless of their background. However, Anderson (2006) asserts that leaders cannot be naïve in thinking that their efforts to promote change will not be met with resistance, both from within the school and from the external environment. One of the toughest behaviors to master is accepting responsibility for our actions and finding the courage to continue to facilitate change. Sharing power, taking risks to build relationships with target group members, taking responsibility for our mistakes, having humility and a willingness to admit to not knowing, and earning trust are the tenets of a social justice leadership approach (Bogotch, 2002). Working toward social justice in an educational organization means guiding students in critical self-reflection of their socialization into a matrix of unequal relationships and the ability to challenge these hierarchies (Cochran & Smith, 2004). Ozlem and Robin (2008) assert that many school districts list social justice as a programmatic value in their mission statement yet fail to operationalize how it will be addressed yet, as moral stewards, school leaders should be much more heavily invested in “purpose-defining” activities (Harlow, 1962, p. 61).



The emerging social justice dialogue calls on school leaders to question the assumptions that drive school policies and practices to create more equitable schooling. To meet this challenge, school leadership programs must prepare new leaders to critically inquire into the taken-for-granted structures and norms that often pose insurmountable barriers for many students' academic successes (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). In an effort to implement a mission grounded in social justice, the instructional leader must be open and reflective. Boyatzis and Mckee (2004) explain that emotions matter enormously in leadership and primal leadership is a crucial element that determines whether a leader's initiatives take off or go awry by systematically evaluating the cultural climate and adjusting the emotional thermostat when necessary. In the world of educational leadership, I know that challenges facing this profession are difficult. Jackson (2005) brings to light that school leaders are faced with increasing accountability and high-stakes testing and they must think critically and act courageously to ensure that the children they serve have access to a quality public school education.

Elmore (2000) asserted, "If public schools survive, leaders will look very different from the way they presently look, both in who leads and what these leaders do" (p. 3). The present ferment over this new conception of leadership provides an opportunity to reconsider within a social justice discourse what it means to lead in schools where student learning, rather than the management of daily operations, is the heart of the work (Elmore, 2000). If we do not address the needs of the marginalized student then we will pay a hefty price in the future. This population needs leadership that advocates change, opportunity, and support placing the disenfranchised in a position to experience success in the classroom. This marginalized population has struggled, faced

failure, and was unable to experience success because of their unique life experience. I connected with my students through an ethic of care that fosters trust and respect for my students and the tough challenges they faced.

### **Conclusion**

My leadership platform illustrates that with support and encouragement, success can be found in education. My personal challenges and educational obstacles have provided me with an opportunity to work for students who have been overlooked, who have under achieved, and who have not found education as a valuable resource. I believe that through my leadership I can impact this population. It is important to understand that school leadership plays a crucial role in the success of student performance. The literature review offers an overview of how school leaders address the challenges of education. There are many challenges that pull at the attention of school leaders and as their responsibility swells stress, feeling overwhelmed, and pressures of state and federal mandates provide constant pressures and added stress.

## **Chapter III**

### **Literature Review**

The following literature review provided an in-depth analysis into educational leadership of alternative education. The literature paints broad and detailed strokes which create an intricate explanation of the responsibilities of leadership and the professional and personal impact leadership can inflict. The students who attend alternative schools, the professionals who teach them, and the educational leaders who lead them are woven into a cultural experience that explores the challenges which affect alternative education. Taking a close look at one's professional practice, yet taking a closer look at one's professionalism, personal experiences, and leadership development within a specific context provides other educators with a sense of leadership that is necessary while leading an alternative high school. The challenges of leading an alternative educational environment are impacted by the alternative educational environment, dropout and retention issues, ethnicity and gender and its impact on dropout, dropout prevention strategies, teachers who teach the alternative education student, the role of school leaders, the shared vision of the school leader, the challenges of federal and state demands on educational leaders, the importance of race and its impact on educational leadership, reflective practice and its influence on leadership development, and leadership in an alternative educational setting

#### **Alternative Educational Environments**

Alternative education refers to a broad spectrum of educational program strategies that differ from those offered within a traditional public educational setting. Alternative education has a wide variety of programs to meet the needs of diverse learners. The

models of alternative education provide education from many different spectrums which include addressing the educational needs of disruptive students and advanced placement students, in addition to the specialized curriculum reflected in the missions of charter schools and home schooled children (Aron, 2003).

As administrators, we are responsible for producing a society and workforce that will promote quality community members. Alternative schools were developed to provide students with an education that will ensure employability and make certain they have the life skills necessary to navigate through society. Alternative education is not a new paradigm and has played an important role in our educational system for many years. Alternative schools were prolific between 1960 and 1970 across the United States. Educational priorities shifted toward a more progressive educational model by politicians and educators who were dissatisfied with the traditional curriculum (Conley, 2002). Alternative education was supported by federal legislation which embraced a different educational model for marginal and disenfranchised students. The premise of alternative education was based on the idea that some students may learn better in an environment structured differently than that of a traditional academic setting (Marsh & Willis, 2003). In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act greatly supported alternative education. The funding was designed to create programs that would prevent student dropout and academic failure (Land & Legters, 2002)

The popularity of alternative education regained its momentum in the mid 1990s (NCES, 2001). Currently, two percent or 280,000 of American students receive alternative education (Grunbaum et al., 1999). However, alternative schools struggle with negative stigmas such as being a dumping ground for the district's worst students, a

warehouse for at-risk student behavior and those who continually lack credits needed to graduate, and for students exhibiting delinquent behavior (Arnové & Strout, 1980). Many students are exposed to inequalities in school financing and low teacher quality, all of which help maintain the status-quo in an alternative school environment (Valencia, 1997). For this reason, alternative education is designed to meet the needs of students who are labeled as disadvantaged and marginal (Raywid, 1995). Many students bring with them the negative school experiences and dislikes for education that prompted their removal from the traditional educational environment and placement in an alternative educational setting. Educators and administrators tirelessly accept the challenge of meeting the needs of alternative learners.

The effectiveness of alternative education has been linked to reducing truancy, improving attitudes toward school, helping students accumulate high school credits, and reducing behavior problems (Cash, 2004). However, the true purpose of alternative education has not always been meeting its desired goal of promoting academics and providing a quality education for this population. Cox (1995) conducted research related to the effectiveness of alternative schools and found that alternative education programs displayed a small overall effect on school performance, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem, but had no effect on delinquency. In North Carolina, research was conducted at an alternative school that focused on delinquent behaviors such as violence, truancy, and disruptive behavior. The results of the study reported that the alternative school was ineffective at positively addressing these behaviors (Cobb et al., 1997). The study also reported that staff lacked the training necessary to address the educational needs of this population.

There are factors that can positively impact students in an alternative academic setting. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) identified eight positive factors that promote a successful alternative school environment. They are as follows: trust and respect from teachers, desire to be a part of a family, teachers as caring agents, opportunities to be responsible, choice options versus punitive actions, a supportive environment, differentiated instruction, and flexibility. The students in alternative educational settings deserve the opportunity to attend a postsecondary institution that will provide them with the opportunity to obtain a trade or technical skill. Alternative schools can experience success in addressing the needs of students who require an environment that is flexible and student centered in meeting their curricular needs. Billings (1995) contends that students in an alternative academic setting are engaged in lessons, motivated, and care about their education.

There have been strategies employed that have been geared toward the alternative students designed to meet their social and emotional needs. These strategies include: peer groups, guided group interaction, and small group counseling approaches, which give students the opportunity to express their feelings in an academic setting. Students who dropout of school lack the education and have a limited skill set, which makes it difficult for them to compete in a twenty first century society. The alternative student in many cases needs programs that will foster positive behaviors and academic support that ultimately leads to a quality education. Programs that are geared toward preventing dropout, identifying individual student needs, and can increase the number of students graduating from high school is the overall vision of the instructional leader.

## **Dropout and Retention**

The more accountability systems become focused solely on cognitive achievement, the greater the gap between those students who are doing well and those who are not (Fullan, 2007). When the needs of children are not met early, they enter their teenage years without guidance or a plan to experience educational success. Negative school experiences include, lack of positive interactions with teachers who lack training and experience in dealing with students from diverse backgrounds, and placement in special education programs in addition to retention. A perceived lack of caring by teachers leads to diminished success in school, negative self-esteem, and low grades that ultimately push students to quit school all together (Sergiovanni, 1994).

The brand name given to this student population by educators may be internalized and the meaning of the label becomes the direction for the behavior. There are different theories regarding the mechanisms associated with deviant behavior and why teenagers dropout. Stearns and Glennie (2006) argue that teenagers leave school because of academic failure, disciplinary problems, or employment opportunities. However, Azzam (2007) examined the views of diverse youth ages 16-25 who failed to complete high school and identified five reasons why the students left school. Forty seven percent of students reported they were bored in school, 43 percent stated they missed too many days and could not catch up, 42 percent stated they spent time with people who were not interested in school, and 38 percent stated that they had too much freedom and not enough structure in their lives. Negative self-esteem has been linked to low participation in and commitment to school. Bailey and Paisley (2004) assert that students who do not

perform well academically are often retained in the same grade for another year which creates many additional issues for the struggling student.

In school districts across the country, grade retention is a common practice (Dawson, 1998). Dropping out of high school has been linked to retainment in earlier grades. Disengagement from school, particularly if it leads to grade retention, increases the likelihood of dropout (Finn, 1989). There may be fewer jobs for dropouts in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society and their earning potential could be significantly lower than their graduate counterparts. Schwartz (1994) contends that in 1992 the average annual income for dropouts was just under \$13,000. However high school graduates make approximately one-third more. It is not solely that the student was kept back in a previous grade but rather the combination of low academic achievement, self-esteem and limited social interactions with peers who were not retained that negatively influence students' perception of education (Bowman, 2005). For example, the friends retained students had with grade level peers in elementary school may be graduating from eighth grade, while the retained students are faced with another year of school with classmates who are younger, which can create feeling of isolation and loneliness (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997).

Research indicates that while grade retention does not typically increase student performance it is widely practiced in schools throughout the country (Bowman, 2005). School districts were placed in a precarious position by state mandates and the "Nation at Risk" report. Roderick (1994) asserts that school districts who graduate students that do not meet the basic skill requirements have been met with opposition at the state and federal levels. School administrators, teachers, and parents are forced to evaluate the



seriousness of both retention and promotion. Schools have been subjected to scrutiny if students were promoted without having mastered the skills needed to move on to the next grade (Balow & Schwager, 1990). Smith and Shepard (1989) contend that school readiness, developmentally appropriate physiological readiness, an effective pre-school curriculum, and the treatment of diagnosed disorders, can improve student success and reduce retention. In 1997 the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) looked at the promotion policies of 85 school districts. The researcher found that of the 85 school districts that had written policies, there was little agreement regarding issues associated with promotion, who makes the decisions to retain, and educational alternatives for students who are struggling (Bowman, 2005).

Another critical consideration in examining the population that drops out of school is related demographic disparities. Black, White, and Latino students all are provided with an opportunity to obtain a quality education. However there is an obvious difference between the rates at which these ethnic groups leave high school, when compared to their White peers, with and without their diploma. It is important to continually evaluate the impact of ethnic, racial, gender, religious, and socioeconomic differences on dropout rates.

### **Ethnicity and Gender and its Impact on Dropout**

American society is becoming increasingly multiethnic and multilingual (Rodriguez, 1990). The student demographics are progressively becoming more disparate with the teaching demographics. Several empirical studies have shown a disparity in the rate which ethnic groups and gender are dropping out of school. This disparity can be attributed to differences in socio-economic status index (Fernandez, Paulsen, & Hirano-

Nakanishi, 1989). It is critical to investigate exactly who is falling through societal cracks. Chavez et al. (1989) explain that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to drop out than their White counterparts. However, White female students who become pregnant, are more likely to dropout of school than pregnant Black students (Manlove, 1998).

Black and Latino students are more likely than White students to be diagnosed with learning disabilities and among diagnosed students they are more likely than Whites to be placed in restrictive educational settings where they are isolated from regular classrooms and non-disabled peers (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Fierros and Conroy further contend that boys will be more likely than girls to leave school for academic problems. However, Black and Latino students will be more likely than White students to leave school due to exclusion and labeling. Consistent with the research, minority school districts are more likely to implement policies that are rigid and do not equally and evenly support a diverse student population. For example, schools with a high concentration of poor and minority students are slightly more likely to have zero-tolerance policies in place (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Similarly, Blau (2003) contends that Blacks are more likely than teens of other racial and ethnic groups to engage in some behaviors that break school rules and norms, such as failing to complete homework, cutting class, and arriving at school late, which contributes to the high dropout rate.

The dropout rate plays an important part in our society and workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen. The lack of minority students entering college may be a sign that change needs to take place if an equal education is to be obtained by all students regardless of

ethnicity. This problem associated with the dropout rate has motivated school administrators to brainstorm new and innovative ways to keep students in school and focused on their education. School administrators are charged with the task of increasing test scores and providing dropout prevention programs that are effective. As a result of unwavering efforts, administrators have been developing unique prevention programs designed to reduce the dropout rate of students.

### **Dropout Prevention**

Education has come under scrutiny in recent years due to the number of high school dropouts. Eliss, Grant, and Haniford (2007) outlined a new strategy to address the high school dropout rate. The authors evaluated the structure of education with an emphasis on teachers, administrators, and access to information. They found that students do not come to school to intentionally fail. Conversely, many find the learning process difficult because of their inability to access information that would otherwise reduce stress and anxiety. Eliss, Grant, and Haniford (2007) assert that educational stakeholders must work to reframe the way in which problems are defined such that a broader range of possible solutions can be considered. Hendrie (2004) asserts that school districts and even some states are downsizing public high schools to combat high dropout rates and low levels of student achievement, especially in big-city school systems. School leaders are downsizing in an effort to increase instructional time with students who wouldn't have otherwise benefited from this academic attention in a larger educational setting.

There are statewide initiatives geared toward resolving the dropout rate. Jacobson (2006) identified a new program in Georgia that is geared toward providing high schools with a full-time educator dedicated to preventing students from dropping out of high

school. This teacher's job is solely to prevent or reduce the rate of dropout in Georgia. Consistent support of low achieving students combined with relationship building with families enables the home, school and community to partner in creating positive school experiences for students. The teacher in this nontraditional position is also charged with meeting with teachers to identify academically at-risk students and devising strategies that are individualized and work to reduce the ecological factors that are impacting academic performance. Similarly, Chmelynski (2006) provides insight to a dropout prevention program in Trenton, New Jersey that offers flexible school hours, satellite sites throughout the city, and the opportunity for students to earn credits for college while attending high school. A study of past graduates found over 85% of graduates from the program had jobs, were in the military, or attending college fulltime. Similarly, Deye (2006) focuses on the use of Indiana's Core 40 program which was developed with input from business and higher education leaders to prepare students for college and careers by making sure they take the right classes in English, math, science, and social studies.

If we are to move beyond the stagnancy that has limited the possibilities for both teachers and students for far too long, we must encourage those involved in secondary schools to adjust the frames within which problems are perceived (Eliss, Grant & Haniford, 2007). Trust in school is grounded in four constructs including respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity (Fullan, 2007). Currently, more attention has been given to the students' sense of connectedness to school and its influence on their decisions to stay or drop out (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). In their appraisal of successful prevention programs in alternative high schools, Wehlage et al (1989) found that developing a sense of community within the school is something that

can play an important role in student success. Fine (1991) asserts that a sense of community is important in preventing student dropout.

Students need to express their opinions regarding their educational experience, and instructional leaders, teachers, and parents are responsible for connecting school to real life outcomes. Additionally, supporting struggling learners with individual academic attention, improving school climate, ensuring that students have a relationship with at least one adult in the school and improving relations between schools and communities serve in reducing the dropout rate (Azzam, 2007). The relationships that exist between teachers and students can have positive or negative outcomes on their academic trajectory. One solution to reduce the growing dropout rate can be found in improving relationships between at-risk students and school staff members (Sergiovanni, 1994). A negative relationship between teachers and students which foster feelings of frustration by the teacher only strengthens the students' decision to dropout. Stevenson & Ellsworth (1993) and Carley (1994) identify poor relationships with teachers as a causal factor in dropping out.

Students find it difficult to trust teachers in school. Sergiovanni (1994) contends that many students are unable to identify one teacher with whom they could turn to for help, and most believe that no one at school cares about them. Students of all ages and backgrounds, even those who seem detached, want a teacher who cares about them. Students, who are dejected and emotionally exhausted from school due to feeling as if teachers and administrators do not care about their education, ultimately leave school (Bernard, 1996). Typically, students who drop out of school believe that they are disliked, unwelcome, and incapable of succeeding in school (Jordon, Lara, &

McPartland, 1996). How an educator speaks to a student can have a long-term impact and can guide whether or not a student stays engaged in the educational process. Teachers can establish positive relationships with students by connecting with them as individuals and taking time to pay attention to their experiences and interests (Louis & Smith, 1991).

Rosenholtz (1989) asserts that effective teaching practices are largely absent from the school interventions geared toward reducing school dropout rates. Open communication and caring for every student seems to be a dropout prevention strategy for teachers. McPartland (1994) identified that student success can be nurtured in the context of a caring and supportive environment. Additionally, McPartland (1994) identified clear communication of the relevance of education and addressing students' personal problems as critical to facilitating school engagement. Thurlow et al. (2002) asserts those identifying multidimensional strategies that engage the student such as monitoring on-task behavior, encouraging active participation in course activities, and nurturing positive social interactions can create a holistic environment that contributes to academic success.

### **Teachers of Alternative Education Students**

In the absence of teachers possessing adequate certification and skills combined with no fundamental frame in which to focus educational resources, the alternative education student may not develop skills to be successful in society. Exiting high school with a degree that does not reflect minimum basic educational skills may create a quick fix to a long-term problem. The primary premise of education is to produce members of a functional society that will support social norms, support sustained employment, and maintain the cycle of a healthy community (Sergiovanni, 1994). In the alternative

education setting the instructional leader must provide the vision to effectively implement programs that will meet the needs of the marginalized and disenfranchised student. The instructional leader is charged with identifying and providing programs that engage students in the learning process, prepare students for a barrage of state standardized testing, and provide teachers with the resources to effectively implement the districts curriculum. When a student's environment negatively impacts their ability to learn, the likelihood that they will drop out increases exponentially (Finn, 1989). Instructional leaders have to provide guidance to teachers about how to support students learning beyond the confines of their classrooms.

The focus of education is on the interaction between the teacher and the student. Therefore it is important for the teacher to project an attitude that fosters cyclical learning (Sergiovanni, 1994). The behavior and attitudes that are shaped in the academic environment can foster negative and positive relationships. Teachers espoused attitudes and their in-use behavior in the classroom can begin to shed some light on the issues regarding special education students attending an alternative academic school environment. Croninger (2001) asserts that dropouts feel disconnected from teachers and complain that their teachers do not care about them and are not interested in how they perform. What has been taught to pre-service teachers in educational methods courses is not sufficient for today's diversified classrooms (Flores, 1992).

The focus of education is to produce a functional society that will support social norms, continue to contribute to the economy through sustained employment, and continue the cycle of a healthy community. In charting my leadership journey, my hope

was to bring clarity to what is needed to provide a quality education for students in alternative education and to find a balance between my personal and professional life.

### **The Role of School Leaders**

A school principal is expected to be a combination of bureaucrat, educational leader, community pillar, role model, surrogate parent, and moral agent as they respond to all of the school's constituents. With the current school restructuring, principals are an integral part of government policies enacting fiscal restraint and accountability (Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2001). It is expected that the principal will be responsive to all while simultaneously meeting building needs, requests for quality resources and adequate yearly progress with the expectation that test scores will rise (Fullan, 2007). This type of responsibility can create anxiety, stress, and lack of job satisfaction. Job stress results in decreased physical health, psychological wellbeing, and life expectancy (Fletcher, 1988).

The pressures of school leadership have placed exhausting demands on administrators, negatively impacting the health of school leaders and ultimately longevity in the profession. In addition to the common stressors existing among managers in administrative or industrial organizations, school principals are exposed to stressors stemming from the faculty and students (Begley, 1982). Compared to teachers, the principal's role is much wider and includes dealing with personnel, pupils, community, and long and short term administrative issues that can impede an administrator's ability to fulfill their vision (Fullan, 2007). The school administrator is required to complete a large number of assignments in the face of multiple interruptions. There are many factors associated with stress in administration. Wax and Hales (1984) found that stress leads to



professional burnout among school leaders, resulting in lack of fulfillment of professional goals, as well as physical and emotional health issues.

Fullan (2007) describes the physical conditions of school principals as unhealthy. Fullan asserts that 40% of the administrators surveyed in a school district abroad visited a doctor with stress-related problems in the prior year and thirty percent were taking medication. The overwhelming responsibilities that affect school principals have directed researchers to analyze their decision to quit the profession. Twenty two percent of the principals in the study left the profession because of health related issues resulting from faculty and student stress (Fullan, 2007).

The responsibilities can be daunting and many school administrators are trying to meet the needs of their teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders. Educational leaders must have the knowledge and skills that give them the capacity to create a culture with collective responsibility (Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1992). The stakes are high for leaders to create, foster, and maintain meaningful change that will provide students with the skills for the twenty first century. School principals have to work in a profession that demands their time, commitment to children, faculty, and parents, while at the same time maintenance of high academic standards for students. With state and federal regulations keeping a close watch on school performance, it is critical for boards of education to not only identify and retain competent school administrators but to also provide them with the support needed for them to meet the needs of students.

Not all students can perform in a traditional educational environment and as a result, many often become frustrated with school. Their frustration leads to disruptions in

class, attendance issues, and low grades which can discourage academic success (Sergiovanni, 1994). Teachers may become frustrated and reluctant to teach the challenging student. In many cases they have exhausted all of their teaching strategies and experienced no change in the student's academic performance. Alternative education can provide opportunities for students who often struggle in a traditional academic setting. However, the instructional leader must have the right vision to educate a unique population of students. The instructional leader can not work independent of the teachers so it is vital to gather support for his or her educational vision so that it can become a school wide mission. All children are entitled to a free and appropriate education. However, when the opportunities for the non-traditional student become scarce, school leaders need to take a proactive role in providing vision to lead our alternative students.

### **Developing a Shared Vision as a School Leader**

School leaders are responsible for the educational growth and social development of our future generations. As an instructional leader, I have discovered that I need to have the ability to find a balance between leading and following. When a shared vision is developed and implemented by the faculty, they will support and embrace school values and behaviors which in turn will create a healthy school culture. Greenfield (1987) describes instructional leadership as the ability to develop a productive and satisfying working environment for teachers and desirable learning conditions in order to create positive academic outcomes for students. Collaborative environments exist in schools in which principals encourage joint ventures between teachers and administrators that can facilitate partnerships. In doing so, principals should make leadership the responsibility of every teacher, creating a sense of ownership in a climate conducive to shared goals.

The behavior of the faculty and their personal beliefs regarding their roles as educators are valuable pieces of information which can affect culture within the educational organization. It is the responsibility of the building administrator to capture the perceptions, values, and needs of the staff to offer opportunities for professional growth to facilitate student success. Fullan (2007) asserts that organizational relationships can be enhanced by combining a top-down with a bottom-up leadership paradigm. He further suggests that this model coupled with capacity building and emphasis on results can create a shared vision and educational innovation. As such, principals and teachers need to be followers of the dream to educate all children and exhibit commitment to making it a reality (Sergiovanni, 1994). The reality of quality instruction for all students is embedded in a collaborative vision between administrators, teachers, and students.

It is important to have a clear vision and teacher consensus that is aligned with the leadership philosophy of the school administrator to foster positive academic results. Cawalti (2003) suggests that central office leaders have shifted their focus toward improving those processes that contribute to higher achievement rather than focusing on more traditional roles of control, resource allocation, and supervision. For example, it has been found that a focus on professionalism of staff and a healthy school culture promotes academic success (Fullan, 2007). In becoming purposeful communities, schools provide the structure necessary to develop a culture of empowerment, collegiality, and change. The leadership of the school community does not rely on power over others, but on power through others to accomplish shared visions and goals (Sergiovanni, 1994). It is important for the school leader to capitalize on the strengths of the faculty to implement the changes needed to acquire a shared vision which can be achieved by keeping people

informed, developing relationships amongst those involved, and enlisting staff in the decision making process, and acknowledging their contributions (Kouzes & Posner, 1987).

However, when the school leader does not openly embrace and garner staff support for these proven strategies, the educational vision cannot be adequately met. Rosenholtz (1989) blames lack of leadership and direction as the primary cause of low achieving schools. Principals play a crucial role in shaping trust amongst school staff which can have a dramatic influence both directly and indirectly on the effectiveness of the school vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Other factors that have been found to contribute to a lack of shared vision include a deficient direction as evidenced by inconsistent communication, individually driven glory, and apathetic work habits that disrupt educational success (Argyris, 1990).

As an educational leader, my goal was to garner a positive educational environment in two different alternative education settings through the examination of my leadership style. Leadership is a living collection of personal experiences that shape values, ethics, and philosophy regarding education. Ultimately, the burden falls on the school leader to teach and reinforce strategies that encompass the school vision that staff can utilize to achieve optimal success in the classroom. School leaders bring with them their personal life experiences and expectations that impact their leadership and organizational philosophy. Sergiovanni (1994) suggests that authentic leaders are genuine in their approach. Similarly, Fullan (2007) suggests that personal attributes such as impatience, a failure to listen, and behaving in ways that exclude others can undermine effective leadership. An effective leader needs to understand how to contribute to the

vision of the school. School leaders are not alone in their quest to provide a vision for students that will enable them to become competitive in this millennium. Under ideal circumstances, teachers are grounded in the belief that all students can learn. In order to nurture behavior that facilitates positive change, school leaders must lead by promoting mutual trust and respect amongst staff. This in turn promotes quality student teacher relationships (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Effective leaders avoid personalizing negative interactions with staff. For example, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) contend that trust is generated when school leaders confronted by angry staff do not become defensive. An effective leader must also identify and manage resistance exhibited by staff in the face of change. Resistance is often a natural response to change and a key challenge faced by school leaders attempting to change the school culture. Argyris (1990) asserts that the leader's responsibility is to move staff from Model I to Model II behaviors. By understanding the needs of staff and their values the instructional leader can better understand what drives the behaviors within their building. Model I behavior, according to Argyris (1990), does not have a significant impact on the organization and does not sustain long term change. On the other hand, Model II behavior enables faculty to redirect their actions which can change culture, purpose, and goals within the organization. The instructional leader must reach beyond the walls of their building to foster community relationships that promote education and provide opportunity for students. What occurs within the confines of the classroom is only one component of a student's life that must be considered.

School administrators are charged with the responsibility of bridging the communication gap between the school and greater community. As a school leader it is

important to identify the geography of the community and identify stakeholders that support educational growth. American society has never been more linguistically, culturally, religiously, ethnically, and racially diverse (Prewitt, 2002). Communities are changing and the people within those environments bring with them an array of diversity. As both urban and suburban communities experience changes in racial and ethnic demographics, school leaders are charged with meeting the diverse needs of students, gaining parental support, and identifying resources for a diverse student population (Moll, 1992). The diversity in our communities is reflected in the demographics of the students in our classroom. As a result, it is critical for school leaders to serve as facilitators of community collaborations that will promote a deeper understanding of differences in order to develop a foundation for academic success. Leadership, when immersed in a community with diversity can foster a neighborhood grounded in student focused success (Moll, 1992). Communities where school leaders live and work can help to cultivate authentic connections that can nurture prosperity for the school, student, parents, and stakeholders (Prewitt, 2002).

The school can be a community within a community when school leaders facilitate the process of building relationships with students, teachers, and parents. Communities develop when a shared vision is forged between the school administrators, faculty, parents, stakeholders, and students. Creating and supporting a shared vision is essential to fostering an environment that is reflective, understanding, and meaningful to the student (Sergiovanni, 1994). Administrators are responsible for student success that is embedded in mutual collaboration with teachers that leads to positive student outcomes. Fullan (2007) contends that after the educational needs are determined by the faculty, it is

the principal's role to construct opportunities that will sustain a healthy community and empower organizational growth. A community should begin with the school administrator and expand outward toward the faculty, students, parents and stakeholders. However, many administrators are stifled by the rigors of state and federal academic mandates which make it difficult for the school leader to partner with community stakeholders.

### **Federal and State Demands on Educational Leaders**

Our federal government has played an important role in public school education and has provided state fund to support programs that will increase academic success for all students. With the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the federal government utilized the states to monitor, evaluate, and improve education with federal funding. In 1975 the Federal government passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that emphasized such concepts as free and appropriate public education for all disabled children in the least restrictive environment with individual and family plans and flexibility in assessment (Moore, 2002). In 1994, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was amended requiring all states to have state wide assessment systems to determine whether schools and districts receiving Title I funding are making adequate yearly progress (Robelen, 2000).

In 2002 the federal government flexed its muscle and passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which has had a significant impact on public education. The goal of this legislation was to make sure that all American children demonstrate academic proficiency as measured by rigorous testing by 2014 (Moore, 2002). The states are responsible for carrying out the federal mandates in an effort to produce massive

improvements in educational outcomes for all groups of students (Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). These mandates place enormous pressure on school leaders to ensure that improvements are being implemented. If local school districts are not meeting adequate yearly progress, states are given the power to make sweeping changes over local school districts (Sunderman & Orfield, 2007). Administrators are under pressure to find a balance that will create a shared vision and at the same time meet the standards set by No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002).

As federal funding became abundant, the government mandated that state education departments monitor the use of this funding by local school districts. Additionally, the federal government has required that the evaluation of the educational process is the responsibility of each state. The United States Constitution does not mention education specifically, so it is up to each state to assume responsibility for the education of children. As a result of the federal mandates, each state is operating independently trying to meet federal education regulations. With high demands placed on school districts to produce students that meet the mandated standards, the school leader is constantly reflecting on ways to develop a shared vision that will increase academic success. Due to federal and state mandates, school administrators find it increasingly difficult to do their job effectively. School leaders are juggling the enormous responsibility of meeting the needs of students, teachers and the larger community within the context of state and federal legislation. The vast responsibilities shouldered by school leaders can promote stress that can ironically derail administrators from successfully meeting the needs of their organization.



## **Race and its Impact on Educational Leadership**

To further understand my leadership experience I have explored the challenges faced by Black male instructional leaders by exploring literature that focuses on relevant issues affecting this racially diverse segment of the education community. Leading is a lonely responsibility for any aspiring school administrator; however there are challenges that directly affect Black male school leaders. They are charged with the same responsibilities as their male counterparts coupled with the additional strain presented by faulty perceptions and stereotypes generated in the community associated with being a leader of color. As such, it is important to critique the historically negative stereotype of Black male instructional leaders by White administrators and their genuine leadership capability in an education setting.

It is imperative that educational leaders consider the whole child while striving to promote academic success. The student population within the United States is becoming increasingly diverse presenting leaders with the task of developing innovative means for meeting the varied needs of the student body. This can be impeded by the disconnect between educational professionals and policy makers and can keep the hands of school leaders tied, very often paralyzing them in meeting policies and understanding the needs of those struggling academically. Students can be negatively impacted by the lack of access to teachers and educational leaders with whom they have something in common. The number of teachers and administrators of color have decreased since *Brown vs. Board of Education* which has had a significant impact on the school experiences of students. Similarly, this social phenomenon has also had a negative impact on the professional experiences of administrators of color (Lyons & Chestley, 2004).

There are cultural and social barriers that exist in public education that have restricted Black male instructional leaders from flourishing professionally. In 1954, the United States Court declared segregation unconstitutional in its landmark ruling, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Over the next twenty years, this ruling would slowly change the racial make-up of school facilities. This ruling also, in a proverbial sense, required that all students, regardless of race, receive an adequate education (Blanchette, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Patterson, 2001). In the year 2009, fifty-five years after the *Brown* decision, many educators and scholars alike are feeling less than enthusiastic about the gains made over the years in the desegregation of schools (Bell, 2004). Despite the promising intentions of the *Brown* ruling, another area in which *Brown* has had a less than encouraging impact centers around the small number of African Americans in leadership roles at predominately White schools (Brown, 2005). One of many negative factors of the *Brown* case was the disparity that took place during the integration process. When school integration finally took place in southern states, African American principals who were in charge of predominately Black schools were the ones who typically lost their jobs to White administrators (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2005; Ogletree, 2004). Despite the gains that resulted from the *Brown* ruling, faulty perceptions and stereotypes of leaders of color have restricted the professional development of administrators, ultimately impacting the education of students.

The impact of racism was apparent immediately following the *Brown* ruling as evidenced by the reduction of African American principals and teachers when White and Black schools eventually merged (Ogletree, 2004). In one southeastern state, the number of African-American principals dropped exponentially between the years 1963-1973 by

99% to 3% in 2009 (Patterson, 2001). Patterson argued that racism was one of the primary reasons for the significant drop in the number of African American principals.

Consistent with previous research, Ortiz (1982) asserts that White males are more likely to occupy positions that might lead to higher central office posts. Administrative positions differ in terms of hierarchy, power, and professional mobility. For example, the elementary principalship is the lowest line administrative position in the hierarchy of school administration (Ortiz, 1982). The playing field for Black principals has placed them in a recognizable disadvantage from their White administrative counterparts. Their sheer lack of presence in more powerful positions has placed enormous pressure on Black male instructional leaders. Today, this perpetuation of racism is reflected in the practice of how African American and White administrators are hired and placed (Harris, 1995). Similarly, Tillman (2003) contends that educational administration remains predominately White. Tillman also points out through the National Center of Education statistics (NCES, 1998) that 65 % of principals in urban schools with predominately African American and other minority student populations are White (p.1). Racism continues to have a pervasive influence on the career development of Black Americans. It is important for Blacks to have a good understanding of how to deal with these issues (Chung, Baskins, & Case 1999).

In this autoethnographic study, I explored my espoused leadership and how I, as a Black male and instructional leader, impacted an all White faculty and a racially and culturally diverse student population in two alternative education settings. I explored the administrative practices of both Wood Beach and Mountain View School districts by comparing and contrasting their support of my position as the school leader, identifying

the organizational culture, and considering the staff's reaction to my leadership style. In doing so, I highlighted how two White Superintendents viewed my leadership in an alternative educational setting. As a Black male administrator, and the only person of color excluding the janitor in one setting, it was imperative to shed light on the experiences that impacted my decision making and emotional state of mind. I discovered that there are pressures that occur from being the only person of color in a leadership capacity that are both rewarding and stressful. The inability to easily connect with a colleague in and outside of these settings who shared similar experiences as a Black leader has made leading lonesome, isolating, and emotionally draining.

### **Reflective Practice and its Influence on Leadership Development**

Reflective practice is a mode that integrates or links thought and action with reflection (Kottkamp, 1990). Reflective practice involves critically analyzing events and meaningful situations with the idea that improvement can happen through this process. Reflective practice entails critically analyzing one's actions with the goal of improving one's professional craft (Kottkamp, Osterman, & Peters, 1991).

People often think about their day and wonder if their decisions have made a difference in their organization. Schon (1983) explains that reflective practice is reflection in-action that skillful practitioners bring to their practice. This reflection explains how the leader within the organization frames situations and reflects on the actions that were taken. One way to promote change from a school leadership perspective is to model reflective practice (Arrendondo, Brody, Zimmerman, & Moffett, 1995). The beliefs of school leaders and current culture of their educational environment sets the stage for deep reflection and action. Central to the idea of reflection is the identification

of discrepancies between beliefs and actions (Arrendondo, Brody, Zimmerman, & Moffett, 1995).

As leaders begin their journey to lead they must constantly reflect on their choices, behaviors, and attitudes in order to develop into an effective leader. Kouzes and Posner (2006) explain that learning more about each other is the first step in overcoming differences. Learning how to create change can be difficult, but is essential for growth personally and professionally. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) assert that individual change is not always easy and it does not happen by accident. Conversely, real change that enables us to manage the inherent stress of leadership must be a fluid practice and develop over time. Leaders must keep in mind that leading takes time and if we are to change behaviors then a clear vision should developed. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) explain that a major threat to achieving our goal is poor time management. The authors further assert that we can only succeed in the change process if we identify what is important and make room for those initiatives.

Leaders bring to their respective organizations a set of values and beliefs that have been carved out of their life. Kouzes and Posner (2006) explain that authentic leadership does not come from the outside in but rather from the inside out. The authors assert that inside out leadership means becoming the author of one's story and the maker of one's own history. Learning how to lead is a process that involves the self as the primary student and utilizing the organizational culture as the teacher.

Organizational cultures provide challenges that confront a leader's emotional intelligence and their ability to address constructs associated with emotional language. Boyatzis and McKee (2002) explain that a humanistic leader will view each person's life

as important, naturally cultivating awareness. Reflective practice can be refined with consistency and a belief that one's actions, when aligned with this practice, will sharpen and strengthen decision making skills. Boyatzis and McKee (2002) explain that reflection is important and a way to promote renewal in one's life.

Reflective practice has both advantages and disadvantages. It can positively affect professional growth and development and lead to greater self discovery, the development of new knowledge about professional practice and a better understanding of the problems that confront practitioners (Osterman, 1990). On the other hand, reflective practice is time consuming and may involve personal risk because the questioning of practice requires that practitioners be open to an examination of beliefs, values, and feelings which may promote great sensitivity (Rose, 1992).

It is important to reflect on behavior, personal philosophy, and values that guide choices. However, reflective practice without an understanding of the rules or techniques that constitute good practice may lead to a repetition of mistakes (Osterman & Kottkamp 2004). Sager (1991) asserts that by asking probing questions which go the heart of the teaching and learning and by gathering data about professional practice, principals establish a norm of inquiry and an understanding of the organization. Alternative school leaders inherit the responsibility of changing ineffective teaching practices and replacing them with strategies that are student centered. Reflective practice can be useful in trying to distinguish a leader's espoused theory from his or her theory in-use when trying to achieve these goals.

## **Alternative School Leadership**

School improvement is defined as the enhancement of student learning through the examination of the teaching-learning process and the conditions that support it (Hopkins 1998). Alternative educational leadership has unique attributes that distinguishes it from other school leaders. Alternative education school leaders often have a strong moral purpose but wrestle with how to effectively translate this in to practice at the detriment of their health and family life (Blackmore, 1999). Although this is not an uncommon feature of principals in other school contexts (Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley, & Beresford, 2000), it tends to be more prevalent in schools that have challenging circumstances thus negatively affecting recruitment of quality teachers in the areas of greatest need (Thomson, Blackmore, Sachs, & Tregenza, 2003). Alternative school leaders are passionate about the marginalized student and can relate to their academic struggles (Blackmore, 1999). School leaders who seek non-traditional education settings demonstrate a deeper understanding of their students and seek to provide the best education possible. Principals who work in these schools often originate from similar socio-economic backgrounds (Blackmore, 1999). Alternative school administrators attend to those systemic issues which are potentially threatening and those which can be utilized to the school's advantage. Their prime accountability is first and foremost the students and their families (Harris, Muijs, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2003). Alternative school administrators work with the marginalized population within public school education to re-engage them in the learning process. An ongoing effort to identify best practices that foster a meaningful educational experience is one of many responsibilities. In order to be up to the task, leaders need to reconceptualize leadership practice itself as

the invitation to share and embrace uncertainty in order to create meaningful discussions on improvement. Leadership for school change requires that an administrator creates emotionally safer learning spaces for both teachers and students. In order to work with this marginalized population, teachers and alternative school leaders need to foster a common vision in which information and responsibilities are shared. My administrative analysis offers personal insight into two alternative education environments.

### **Conclusion**

As I began my administrative analysis I continually pondered, reflected, and considered my choices, emotions, and outcomes as an educational leader. Reflective practice has provided me with the opportunity to replay, evaluate, and comprehend through reflective practice day to day situations from my perspective and consider the opinions of both my faculty and students. The interconnected relationship that exists between teachers, administrators, and students is powered by the leadership that ultimately impacts education. The information I have gathered about myself in this process has expanded my understanding of human behavior and my ability to enhance student performance, teacher interactions, and my decision making skills. The research provided an extensive wealth of information that has given me a greater understanding of the challenges as an African American alternative school leader. There are many forms of research that provide valuable information to some type of phenomena. This research is grounded in an autoethnographic research methodology that utilized my lived experiences as the researcher to gain a better understanding of my leadership in two alternative academic settings



## **Chapter IV**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

There are many factors and variables which affect school leaders who are engaged in the process of educating children in alternative educational settings. The literature suggests that school leadership, reflective practice, and autoethnographic research provide a broader view in which to examine these phenomena (Kottkamp, 1990). In doing so, the researcher embarks on the exploration of self and their impact within the organization (Creswell, 2003). School administrators lead with the intention of educating all students. However, many administrators find this mission difficult to achieve because of state standardized testing mandates such as the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) and federal mandates like the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. If we are to move beyond the stagnancy that has limited the possibilities for school leaders, we must encourage progress through leading, following, and reflecting on what is effectively working within education. It is important for traditional and alternative secondary schools to adjust their frames within which problems are perceived (Eliss, Grant & Haniford, 2007). This can be achieved through the art of reflective practice.

Each school district and school has an individualized and unique culture and environment. Through the use of an autoethnographic methodology, I was able to generate an understanding of these complexities and utilize this information to interpret the organizational climate from the position of an educational leader. Reed-Danahay

(1997) explains that by placing the self within a social context such as a school, the use of autoethnography connects the person to the cultural experience through research and writing. School leaders must wear many hats and do many jobs simultaneously while attempting to successfully provide for quality instruction to students.

### **Rationale for Study**

The underlying principle of this autoethnographic research project was to document how I, as a school leader, impacted two unique alternative educational settings through a form of research which allowed me to connect the personal to the cultural by peeling multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Autoethnographic research honors researchers' voices as members of cultural communities by allowing them to use their experiences within a particular culture "to look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). Creating an environment that promotes academic success through effective leadership can help teachers and students by creating a climate and culture conducive to the non- traditional student. The postmodern stance acknowledges that when conducting research "many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged" over another (Wall, 2006, p. 2). In order to produce an authentic explanation as to how that transpires, an autoethnographic research project was the best means for explaining that experience.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative researcher can take center stage as the primary data source through their journey of self discovery. An autoethnography is a form of research that places the researcher at the center of the study. As the researcher begins to understand the internal structure of the organization, he or she must then begin to reflect inward to analyze how

he or she presence affects the environment. Ellis (1997) explains that autoethnography focuses on introspective and retrospective forays into the self. Ellis further explains that autoethnographic research allows the organizational researcher to intimately connect the personal within the cultural by revealing multiple layers of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that guide behavior.

The researcher analyzes his experiences by examining the relationship between interconnected emotions, decisions, and outcomes. Autoethnography is not an exact science and does not provide a concrete quantitative form of analyzing specific phenomena. It is important to understand that autoethnography is not perfect and does have its share of problems as a methodology. However, Chambers (2003) asserts that the importance of understanding cultures, especially in relation to change efforts, is the cornerstone of applied ethnography as it has emerged in modern society. The close analysis of one's personal experiences can lead to feelings of vulnerability and, as a result, personal and professional risks are an inherent component of the process. This form of research in some respects can be considered the most dangerous fieldwork of all (Lee, 1995).

The methodology allows for deep reflection of the self as well as the culture, resulting in internal and external growth personally and professionally. According to Denzin (1989) the very nature of autoethnography is characterized by personal experiences and narratives. This medium is a way to look at the lives of others as they reveal their personal feelings and emotions while trying to understand how they impact their unique situations. According to Patton (2002) the autoethnographic approach is one that younger researchers may consider a more suitable form of social inquiry, especially

in the world in which there are countless avenues to establish and create the public and reflective self in mediums such as personal blogs, MySpace, Facebook, You Tube, and reality TV. Consistent with current literature, Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain that autoethnographic research reveals how we struggle to make sense of our experiences.

Autoethnography is a term that has been in use for at least two decades and includes a wide range of research and writing approaches which connect the personal to the cultural (Ellis 2004; Ellis & Bochner 2000:739). My interaction as the instructional leader in two alternative settings facilitated personal and professional reflection which stimulated leadership decisions that affected the culture and educational environment as the self researcher. Richardson asserts that autoethnographies are highly personalized, revealing genre of writing in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural (Richardson 2000). Autoethnography is a continuum of science, looking at facts at one end, and art as the exploration of the meaning behind the experience at the other end. The reliability of this type of research methodology is contingent upon the self researcher's honesty and truthfulness (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). This research methodology was challenging because I was the primary focus. Questioning myself, thoroughly reflecting on my decisions as a school leader, and addressing the reactions of my staff offered a deeper understanding of my leadership style and the perceptions of the staff and students.

Autoethnography does not merely require us to explore the interface between culture and self; it required me to write vividly about my experiences. It is the conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, and as a human being within the process of research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Reflection is the

process of critical self analysis and the process of noticing our responses to the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay 1997). Reflective practice was a strategy that allowed me to investigate the rationale behind my choices as an instructional leader, think critically about the reactions my decisions provoked, and determine whether or not my choices provided the best opportunities for the betterment of the school.

Autoethnography provides the reader with a lens that allows for emotional contemplation, personal reflection, and self understanding, which the researcher can use to further shape his or her organizational culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Organizational autoethnographies can provide first hand accounts of taboo topics such as sexual harassment and bullying, parenthood at work, and various moral and ethical dilemmas (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Contrary to the research, Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006) provide a persuasive argument that much organizational research can only explain the past and cannot predict the future. Consistent with Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006), Ellis and Bochner (1996) challenge the idea that research can have only one interpretation of reality. Research can be conducted in a number of ways such as quantitative and mixed-methods, however, the fundamental strategies are similar. All research must have data collection as some type of evidence that an observation took place. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that any dialogue which creates documents is relevant to research.

The ethnographic research approach allows the integration of multiple perspectives through a dialog with others such as teachers, students, and parents. Consistent with Bakhtin (1981), Jackson (2000) affirms that although others may be able to comment on external observer's varied experiences, it is the ones who live these daily

experiences that are the most qualified and well suited to convey the particulars of personally lived experiences. If we use similes, vivid description, and images to capture the world in which we live, then documenting firsthand the accounts of a personal event can provide a new perspective. Eisenberg (1987) explains that metaphors influence the way we view and come to make sense of our world in general as well as the production, communication, and understanding of those experiences.

Telling a story with meaning and conviction has the potential to encourage reflection about a particular life experience. Meaningful stories conjure emotions, reflection, and individual learning. Gaining a deeper understanding how emotions and feelings impact individuals and groups and their subsequent reactions are the basic principle of reflective practice (Kottkamp, 1990). So often we think about a difficult day at work or an exciting experience that has enhanced the quality of our life, which stimulates emotions that generate feelings and perceptions of how we see varying situations. Reflective practice looks closely at critical experiences from two perspectives including that of the person making decisions and of those receiving, interpreting, and responding to the information.

This autoethnographic study offered a genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My leadership development was the primary focus of this research project which spanned two academic years from September 2007 to June 2009.

Understanding how I viewed my own leadership was done through self reflection, which provided a deeper understanding of the challenges I faced as an instructional leader. The experience of being an autoethnographer was unique and included an account of my

emotions that guided change resulting from reflection. This research study was a cyclical journey that highlighted my experiences in two alternative educational settings and revealed how these environments deepened my understanding of self.

### **Research Questions**

This research reflected my own personal challenges, relationships, celebrations, and perceptions of staff and colleagues which have helped to shape my personal outcomes as the principal of two alternative high schools. My personal understandings and interpretations were created with human data sources and professional interactions within the organizational culture of each setting. My goal was to capture the communication, perceptions, and experiences of my colleagues and interlace them into a canvas that paints a personal experience of my leadership development.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did the use of reflective practice bring clarity to my leadership development while leading in an alternative high school environment?
2. How did my leadership theory in-use impact the alternative high school environments?
3. How did the climate and culture impact my leadership development?
4. How useful was the autoethnographic research design in examining my leadership?

### **Data Collection Strategies**

The interactions that I had with staff, parents, and students provided the landscape to explain my journey as an educational administrator through an autoethnographic lens. Autoethnography is a back and forth gaze. My journey started through an ethnographic

wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of personal experiences. I then looked inward exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Patton, 2002). Given that reflective practice is essentially a critical examination of practice, without data about practice the process is stymied (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). In qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study (Creswell, 2003). My data collection strategies consisted of content analysis, audio taping, personal narratives, journals, and documentation of critical incidents that served in providing a means for exploration of my leadership experience.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis was a data collection strategy that was used to collect data that affected the school culture and climate of the organization. I used this data collection strategy to piece together the overall daily operations of the school. Content analysis was used in evaluating written materials produced in the course of normal professional activity. For example, this strategy can examine memos, formal correspondence, lesson plans, meeting schedules, as well as supervision and evaluation reports (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Building administrators prepare documents that inform parents about school events, review lesson plans, and communicate with community stakeholders related to the education program. In an effort to better understand the school culture, I collected personal notes regarding a student or teacher, discipline referrals, monthly faculty meeting agendas, lesson plans, police reports, and email correspondence. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) assert that such information may prove sufficient to elicit



an espoused theory of an organization or to serve as the beginning point for gathering more information through a verbal exchange.

### **Audio Taping**

I used audio taping to document the event of critical situation so that I could reflect on those events during when they were fresh in my mind. It was important to capture my feelings regarding the situation and the impact my decision had on the faculty and student. This form of data collection enabled me as the self researcher to continue to reflect on my experiences long after the situation. I was able to talk through critical moments by verbally expressing my feelings. Audio taping provided me with the opportunity to deeply document my lived experiences as they happened.

The day to day phone calls, meetings, discipline referrals, hiring process, and faculty and student interactions were collected and documented in my digital journal. I used this data collection strategy to capture the events of the day while the experience was fresh. I would then periodically review my digital journal which allowed me to begin to identify emerging themes regarding the school culture and my impact on the environment. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) contend that tape recording can be effective in gathering information about individual behavior. The data collection strategy provided me with the opportunity to capture and reflect on my leadership in the moment.

### **Personal Narratives**

The most reliable information about behavior is gathered through personal narratives. Personal narratives involve reconstructing events from the perspective of the reflective practitioner (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reconstructing situations required that I step back, chronicle events, and describe my actions and reactions to these events.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) emphasize that the primary goal of personal narratives is to generate a detailed description which may incorporate different dimensions of behavior such as intentions, feelings, assumptions, actions and outcomes. Narratives can yield important information about practice and facilitate the identification of theory in-use displayed by staff. Mattingly (1991) describes unstructured oral story telling as a self account of one's work that allows for the analysis of underlying values and assumptions. I believe that it was critical to uncover the feelings associated with my decisions as the instructional leader through the use of personal narratives.

### **Journaling**

Journaling is a form of narrative writing often associated with reflective practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). At the end of each day I wrote a personal account of my decisions and my perception of how these decisions were interpreted by my faculty and students. Journaling is an important means of gathering information about events, actions, feelings, and interpretations (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). My journal contained key phrases including those obtained through parent interactions and student feedback that I used to examine my decisions, actions, and daily events. Brookfield (1995) explains that the use of a log illuminates events that are most memorable. Additionally, I chose to write an additional journal entry on weekends to capture a broader reflective perspective on the previous week's events to further reflect and ensure that I captured data with rich description of the school culture and its impact on my leadership.

### **Critical Incidents**

Writing about critical events allows for the creation of a structured narrative about a particular problem (Osterman, 1991). During this two year period, I made difficult and

significant decisions that elicited strong reactions from me and my staff. Personal experiences, whether one's own or another's, offer an additional means for gathering information about assumptions (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Through the documentation of critical events, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of my morals, values, ethics and virtues that informed my decision making.

### **Conceptual Framework and Process of Reflection**

A conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts, but rather a construct in which each concept plays an integral role. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a conceptual framework “lays out the key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships among them” (p. 440). The conceptual framework for this study included thinking reflectively about my leadership and how I made decisions that impacted teachers and students in various situations. In order for me to serve as an effective instructional leader, I needed to create an educational environment in which academic achievement was positively impacted through collective reflection. My decisions as a leader, including creating a safe environment for students, established the foundation for my vision to come to fruition (Fullan, 2007).

My primary responsibility as an educational leader was to cultivate and sustain an educational environment that enabled all students to reach their full academic potential. I made decisions with that premise at the forefront of my mind. Reflecting upon my leadership analysis allowed me to evolve as an instructional leader and develop a solid foundation from which to base my decisions as an administrator. Additionally, reflective practice was used as an intricate part of my leadership journey in understanding and building upon my experiences as an African American male holding a position of

authority. Reflective practice was a vehicle which allowed me to take a closer look at how my decisions as an African American male leader, in predominately White teaching environments, impacted student achievement and experiences. Further, it allowed me to identify how and why the problems I encountered occurred. This leadership analysis was complex and necessary for the overall betterment of education. This analysis served as an anchor to the rapidly changing culture and pulse of public education. High stakes assessments and accountability measures in addition to a changing student demographic across the United States, warrants constant and thorough reflection as our educational leaders seek to shape and prepare the leaders and citizenry of the future.

Black male leaders are making strides in public school education in spite of mounting stress and pressure. The success of principals in U.S. schools is influenced by demographics and socio-economic issues. For example, by 2020, principals will lead schools where only 49% of the school-aged population will be White, 26% of all children will live in poverty, and 8% will speak a language other than English (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). These statistics emphasize an urgent need for minority leadership. Considering these demographic shifts, with fewer minority administrative leaders and more students of color, how are these new 21st century principals going to cope? The face of public school education will continue to evolve and the leaders who support this new twenty-first century educational renaissance will have the potential to develop innovative curriculums that address the needs of all students. This transformation will not take place without struggle and the changing landscape may give way to a landslide of pressure from White administrators. This is no small task. Increasing diversity among educational professionals and students is one of the most critical adaptive challenges that

schools face. By 2020, students of color will represent nearly half of the elementary and secondary school population (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002).

The current and historical context of race presents challenges to be overcome by Black administrators in the 21st century. Many researchers acknowledge (Dumas, 1980; Linden, Wayne, & Stillwell, 1993; Scott, 1980, Yeakey et al., 1986) that among ethnic minority principals challenges include the task of demonstrating competency in the aftermath of a history that has often deemed them as incompetent by race, guaranteeing that all students perform well, ensuring cultural responsiveness toward all their diverse students, and facilitating a workable means of communicating with parents, caregivers, and other community stakeholders. Through my ethnographic journey I have found that my leadership coupled with my race and ethnicity has impacted my experience negatively as well as joyously. I have reflected critically on my related leadership experiences through an insightful lens.

Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) assert that the reflective practitioner as researcher steps back to examine the nature of the problem, intentions, and daily occurrences. In the process of observing and analyzing my experiences, problems emerge more clearly. Similarly, reflection-in-action is defined by Schön (1983) as the ability of professionals to think about what they are doing while they are doing it. He asserts that the only way to manage the indeterminate area of professional practice is through the ability to think reflectively and apply past knowledge to new situations (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Continual reflection is vital during and after critical situations.

Engaging in reflective practice requires both knowledge of practice and awareness of professional and personal philosophy. Reflection without an understanding of the rules

or techniques that constitute good practice may lead to a repetition of mistakes, whereas reflection without philosophical awareness can lead to a preoccupation with technique (Lasley, 1989). As problems arise, as they often do in educational settings, it is important to look at the nature of the problem and begin to diagnose the direct issues surrounding the problem and how a leader's behavior affects outcomes. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) further assert that reflective practice involves a systematic and comprehensive data-gathering process. Through my personal experiences I have had a unique and personal lens in which to survey my role within the educational landscape of public school education, particularly within the alternative education realm. The deeply ingrained nature of our behavior and the tacit nature of our assumptions can make it difficult to develop a critical perspective of our own behavior (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). The reflective practitioner focuses on inward thoughts and perspectives that shape his decisions, which begin to transform thinking from a singular perspective to a collective understanding involving others. Tatum (2003) asserts that integrating one's past, present, and future into a cohesive unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a life time. Tatum further explains the complexity of identity is made clear by identifying intersections of gender, class, sexuality, race and historical circumstance. It is important to have a profound understanding of self within a reflective paradigm, which provides guidance in the process of meaningful thought. Tatum (2003) contends that constructing our identities is a complex process for all of us, but for some it is more complicated than for others. Engaging in reflective practice requires both knowledge of practice and awareness of professional and personal philosophy in addition to a strong sense of identity. In essence this autoethnography

encompassed not only a journey of leadership development, but also a journey of self awareness and the impact that both have as intersecting components.

My research was grounded in an autoethnographic investigation designed to self assess my leadership within two different alternative education settings. Although the experiences and outcomes varied greatly, my vision and my goals remained consistent synergistically impacting the schools and the direction of my leadership style. Leadership is a powerful construct that can focus the direction of any organization. However, leadership is just one factor that contributes to change. Sheppard (1996) asserts that there are ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ conceptions of instructional leadership where the latter also involves variables, such as school culture, which may have important consequences for teacher behavior. Autoethnography views the researcher’s own experience as a topic of investigation in its own right (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is a mode of inquiry that challenges conventional norms of scholarly discourse. These norms, or “metarules,” privilege arguments, theories, abstractions and jargon over feelings, stories, concrete events, and accessible prose (p. 746). An autoethnography is one of the methods of inquiry that Richardson (2000, pp. 927-930) calls “creative analytic practices” which offers insight into creative and analytic writing formats that are valid representations of the social world. Through a reflective lens, I analyzed my espoused leadership theory providing a detailed account of my leadership experiences.

This autoethnographic research methodology provided the opportunity to self reflect while in the moment of my leadership experience. I was able to identify many facets of my leadership to develop my unique perspective as a school administrator. Quantitative research, as Richardson (2000) notes, can be interpreted through tables and

summaries. On the other hand, she explains that qualitative data is an excerpt of events that chronicle personal lived experiences upon the frame of reflective practice.

Autoethnography and other creative analytical practices do not follow standard writing formats prescribed by traditional social science practices.

Another primary reason for this autoethnographic study is to pinpoint, as succinctly and precisely as possible, why the same approach within two different institutions of learning needing an instructional leader, garnered vastly different outcomes and results. Although my philosophy of education continues to evolve, my morals and values have not wavered. This fact played an integral role in my effectiveness as an instructional leader while simultaneously shaping the leader I have become and am becoming.

Consequently, this autoethnographic research focused on my leadership experiences in two different alternative educational settings and provided insight and the identification of key issues that were sometimes outside of my view and immediate awareness. Within the field of leadership learning there is a general acceptance that leadership practice is predominately learned through informal experiences drawn out from everyday events, notably within organizational contexts (McCall 2004). Clearly who I was culturally, what I looked like, in addition to the past experiences that drove my administrative decisions had an impact upon both contexts as both experiences had a profound impact upon me.

The autoethnographic process provided me with the opportunity to be a self researcher focusing on my experiences and how I impacted others within two vastly different school environments. Bochner (2001) argues that reliability is anchored through



the narrative being interconnected with lived experiences. Through my experiences, journaling, reflecting, and critical analysis I began to understand my thinking, perceptions, feelings, and responses, bringing new meaning to my leadership style. As a reflective genre of writing, autoethnography situates *the self* within the context of a culture, sub-culture or group, and studies one's experience along with that of other members of the group.

Contrary to traditional research, the self researcher is placed directly into the organizational laboratory and begins collecting meaningful data that is then diagnosed for clarity and clairvoyance. Within autoethnographic writing the author and researcher reveals his or her hand, or voice, up front. As explained by Ellis and Bochner (2000), "The goal is to enter and document the moment-to-moment, concrete details of a life" (p. 761). Documenting my experiences provided rich opportunities to process my interactions through a reflective filter. The process of reflection was challenging as I was constantly critiquing my leadership and the impact it had within each educational setting. The process of reflection allowed me to think about my experiences, moment to moment, and immerse myself into the process of reflective practice. This helps to establish an ethic of remaining emotionally present in shaping one's unique role as a school leader to positively influence educational practice (Ackerman & Ostrowski, 2002). As the school leader at Wood Beach Alternative High School it was important to understand and process my emotions during my reflective experience. In doing so, I was able to critically evaluate my decisions, teacher responses, and student behaviors to better understand the impact of my choices as a leader.

### **Wood Beach Alternative High School**

During the 2007-2008 school year I served as the Principal of the Wood Beach Alternative High School. During my tenure at Wood Beach Alternative High School, I was able to reflect on my leadership and grow, which positively impacted student success. Upon being hired, it was made clear to me that change was needed. As a new administrator, I was conscious that I had to make observations that would inform my decision making to create the changes that were needed and expected. However, the implementation of my decisions was contingent upon my position within that context. Building a rapport with the existing staff was paramount and was going to take time. At Wood Beach Alternative High School, change was needed and welcomed, and the capacity for making those changes was developed over time. Monetary constraints impacted my ability to continue to lead at Wood Beach Alternative High School. Subsequently, I was hired as an administrator at Mountain View Alternative High School.

### **Mountain View Alternative High School**

During the 2008 – 2009 school year, I served as the Principal at Mountain View Alternative High School. Despite the fact that I was in a new school setting, the students who attended presented with similar issues of those enrolled at Wood Beach Alternative School. Additionally, the population was equally diverse and similar to the other settings where I had worked. My leadership style remained the same while working at Mountain View Alternative High School as did my goal to empower, encourage, and support teachers in building positive relationships with students. Teachers wanted students to behave, follow directions, and to do their work. This request was made of them in their traditional educational environment without regard to their unique and specific needs,

which is why they were at Mountain View Alternative High School. The students were at the mercy of the attitudes, feelings, and emotions of the teachers which would be unpredictable day by day and also reflected the limited level of commitment to student achievement. Additionally, the environment was visibly teacher-centered and not student-centered as all educational environments should be. This only reinforced the lack of trust that the student body felt for the teachers and the lack of commitment that the teachers exhibited toward the students.

My experience as an administrator at Mountain View Alternative High School was faced with innumerable challenges due to a conflict between my leadership approach and the educational ideology and culture of the school community. The pervasive dysfunction I faced at Mountain View Alternative High School had a significant impact on my leadership approach. My most significant challenge was finding a way to bring about effective and lasting change from a transactional, transformational, social justice and servant theory approach while simultaneously trying to lead a staff with conflicting values. I attempted to achieve this goal within an environment where staff was comfortable with dysfunction and malaise and resistant to change (Argyris, 1990). The atmosphere at Mountain View Alternative High School remained that of a beleaguered alternative setting that attracted an array of students looking for a quality educational experience. Mountain View was inundated with veteran teachers who were entrenched in a traditional teaching paradigm. Vision, enthusiasm, and excitement were met by unenthusiastic teachers who had occupied their educational domains for many years. Despite a clear need, the staff was not willing to make the changes necessary to improve the educational experience for students.

Despite these challenges, I was able to build the capacity to engage students to think critically about their education through reflective practice. Many of my decisions were made with a deep understanding of the potential consequences embedded in my role as the instructional leader. Through many data sources I was able to address the needs of my staff which translated into meaningful student-teacher relationships, a critical component to building the capacity of a student on any level (Fullan, 2007)).

In spite of the similarities in the student population in each setting, the educational culture and my experience was profoundly different. During my tenure at Wood Beach Alternative High School, I was able to model behavior that encouraged respect through a common thread. My ability to garner respect from my students was not derived from their perception of my position and power. Respect began to flourish because I modeled the interactions I was looking for in my staff. The transparency of my decisions encouraged teachers to begin to communicate with students, which fostered a positive interaction that engaged the student in the learning process. Over the course of the year all of my teachers began to take a deeper look at the students to find qualities that were positive, all in an effort to gain trust and nurture learning. It was clear to me that trust was important to our students and when they felt like they could trust others they began to in the learning process and understand its relevance in their lives. More importantly, it was evident that the willingness of the teachers to engage in new practices was a primary determinant of the students' subsequent success.

This autoethnographic study shed light on how I impacted both environments and how ultimately both environments impacted me, my leadership and my capacity to reflect upon the intersecting parts of who I am, how I perceive myself, and how I was perceived

by others. The use of an autoethnographic research design offered the opportunity for me as the self researcher to critically analyze my leadership behavior. I was able to collect meaningful data that provided me with valuable information to effect change. I reflected critically on the choices I made regarding students and teachers. Their reactions offered insight into their beliefs, values, and the meaning of their daily actions. As the instructional leader, my primary focus was to develop the best educational atmosphere for students to learn, develop socially and ultimately become positive members of society. I was responsible for their education, their safety, and a meaningful school experience that they did not receive in their traditional academic setting.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Glesne (2006), coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining scraps of collected data and putting together like-minded pieces of data together to create an organizational framework. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain that the analysis of personal narratives involves a procedure which focuses on the emotional experiences that are documented by the researcher. Through reflective practice I, as the self researcher, provided specific accounts of events, personal emotions, and memorable experiences that elicited an internal reaction in me. I collected critical events and wove my story within the fabric of my leadership experience.

### **Coding the Data**

I have documented my leadership experience by developing a manageable coding scheme which categorized chunks of data into themes (Patton, 2002). Organizing the data that I collected allowed me to categorize the information in an effort to interpret and diagnose cultural themes. In doing so, I transcribed the digital notes from my personal

recorder and analyzed critical moments gleaned from other data sources for emergent themes. Collecting data on a daily basis yielded a plethora of information which required me to develop a process for categorizing data as the research progressed. Patton (2002) contends that the qualitative analyst uncovers patterns, themes, and categorizes by carefully considering what relevant and meaningful data is valuable. My analysis of the data assisted in formulating the data in a succinct accessible manner.

I connected pieces of data together that painted a broader view of my leadership experience. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that narrative text will communicate a holistic picture of the experiences and the meaning attached to the text. Secondly, I documented the specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with my experiences to prompt reflective inquiry into the decisions I made as a school leader. The emergent themes were categorized and discussed within this autoethnographic study in order to provide a panoramic view of the authentic and unique experiences of an African American male in the role of school leader within alternative education.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study provided an opportunity for leadership growth through reflective practice. The experience generated many questions that, with additional experience and analysis, provided clarity to my leadership. I utilized my past experiences and reflective practice to inform my decision making. This autoethnographic analysis challenged me to focus on my failures, the decisions contributed to my failures, and how reflective practice presented the opportunity for growth. Through reflection I began to view every challenge from multiple vantage points and connect meaningful pieces of data that provided me with a deeper understanding of the culture and climate in two

alternative education environments. The culture and climate of the two educational settings where I worked presented unique challenges that provided rich material for my autoethnographic reflective laboratory. The art of reflective practice was ultimately integrated into my style as an educational leader.

## **Chapter V**

### **Wood Beach Alternative High School**

#### **Introduction**

For much of the last quarter century, academics and practitioners have been engaged in a quest to understand the school improvement algorithm (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). There have been ongoing efforts to systematically isolate the variables that produce positive cultural changes and to understand how to replicate those changes effectively in education. As a new administrator, the autoethnographic approach allowed me to view my experiences in the context of reflective practice and to grow from this critical analysis. The autoethnographic methodology offered purpose, opportunities for reflective inquiry, and provided insight into the values associated with my actions as an educational leader. Autoethnography provided first hand accounts of my leadership experience in the laboratory of alternative education. In order to identify specific areas in need of improvement, I explored the culture and climate of two alternative educational settings with the hope that my experience would provide the impetus for future educational research. My research analyzed my lived moments as the instructional leader and placed those experiences into a reflective cognitive microscope for observation. Utilization of a reflective lens was an on-going process that facilitated deeper meaning and informed future actions through the contemplation of past and current behavior (Han, 1995). This autoethnographic research methodology refined my skills as a school leader and was instrumental in developing my leadership theory.



As I reflected on my experiences as an educational leader, the first thing that came to mind was the emotional internal battle that waged war just above my waist and continued upward until it stopped and hovered in the center of my chest. I experienced meaningful events at Wood Beach Alternative High School (Wood Beach) that highlighted my personal and unique challenges as an instructional leader. My critical moments at Wood Beach included my initial meeting with the Superintendent, understanding the hiring process, developing a vision for the school, my interactions with the school secretaries, refining the student registration process, developing new policies and practices, creating meaningful student interactions, and striving to transform the overall culture of the program. The organizational structure of Wood Beach provided a blueprint for understanding and making meaning of the culture. It also guided my decision making related to these critical moments. Through this autoethnographic analysis I provided detailed accounts of my leadership experience by which I used reflective practice to capture the organizational culture of Wood Beach.

### **Cultural Context**

My role as the instructional leader was the primary focus of this study. The various complexities that emerged from leading within a non-traditional environment span across social, emotional, physical, and psychological domains which ultimately impacted the parameters of my leadership. I used the approach outlined by Bolman and Deal (2003) to analyze the organizational demographics and structural frame of both alternative educational settings.

### **Staff Demographics**

At Wood Beach the staff was composed of five teachers, two secretaries and one custodian. This team served as the driving force in helping for non-traditional students complete their high school education. The demographics of the staff were homogenous in terms of gender, age, and race. The Wood Beach faculty was 90% male and 10% female. The average age of my faculty was forty-six years of age. My secretaries had an average age of forty-five, and my custodian was sixty years old. My staff was entirely White and I was the only person of color.

### **Student Demographics**

The age of students at Wood Beach Alternative High School ranged from sixteen to thirty-six. The average age of the students attending school was 21. The race and ethnicity of the students was more diverse than that of the staff. Sixty seven percent of the students were White, 17% were Hispanic, and 13% were African American. Only 3% of the student population identified their ethnicity as something other than White, Black or Hispanic. In terms of gender, 57% of the student population was female and 43% were male students.

### **Wood Beach Alternative High School**

In 1970, the Wood Beach School District opened an Alternative High School to meet the needs of an evolving student population who did not find success in a more traditional school setting. The Wood Beach Alternative High School originally consisted of four classrooms and accommodated students who were a minimum of sixteen years of age seeking to earn their high school diploma. It was required that students under the age of eighteen had to be supported and subsequently enrolled in the program by a parent.

Almost thirty five years later, the school has grown in numbers and has graduated over two thousand students with a high school diploma.

Over that last forty years, Wood Beach has evolved programmatically to include technology, such as career development software programming, education in computer literacy and word processing. Additionally, Wood Beach integrated a focus on post graduate careers into the curriculum by offering a guidance program that allowed students to tour college campuses and enhanced job seeking skills such as interviewing and resume writing. All course offerings were designed to meet the individual needs of adults and teenagers enrolled in an alternative high school.

Wood Beach's hours of operation were from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm Monday through Friday, and 5:30pm to 8:30 pm Monday through Wednesday. The standard graduation requirement set by the State Board of Education for a high school diploma was 110 credits. We provided students with instructional assessment and counseling services as needed to complete their education plan. We were responsible for securing all documentation pertaining to prior and current students. High school diplomas were awarded when the students met the state graduation requirements including completing the required number of credits and passing the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA).

### **District Structural Frame**

The structure of an organization is superficially rooted in traditional rational images yet with a deeper analysis can reveal a versatile and powerful social architecture (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The Wood Beach School District housed both an elementary school and an alternative education program. The structure within the Wood Beach

School district was structurally mechanistic and included a Board of Education, Superintendent, District Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Elementary Principal, Elementary Vice Principal, and an Alternative School Principal. My Superintendent provided consistent support of the Administrators and often met with us to talk about the current trends in education and best practices in educational leadership. Information was disseminated downward from the Superintendent to the Administrators and then disseminated by the Administrators to the Teachers. From my very first day in the district, the Superintendent, Dr. Harvey, was supportive and encouraged me to function autonomously in my day to day decision making. It was clear that he trusted that his Administrators shared his core values related to supporting student achievement.

As the only Administrator in the alternative school, distinct from the elementary school, I had a direct line of communication to Dr. Harvey. There were three administrators who were located in the elementary school who had a different chain of command. The Director of Pupil Personnel Services reported directly to the Superintendent on matters related to special education. The Principal communicated with Dr. Harvey to update him on any issues or concerns that may arise in the overall daily operations of the school, and the Vice Principal reported to the Principal. The structure was simple; however it was the attitude of Dr. Harvey that created a sense of support and growth that fostered a positive climate in the district. Dr. Harvey's approach as an Administrator contributed to my feelings of satisfaction and pleasure with my job.. Bolman and Deal (2003) assert that when a sensible understanding is reached between the employee and the organization, individuals find meaning and are satisfied working in the organization. As I began to further analyze the people within Wood Beach I was able

to better understand the intricacies of the relationships therein and their impact within the organization.

### **Human Resource Frame**

The human resource frame centers on how the characteristics of an organization and people within an organization shape what they do for one another (Bolman & Deal, 2003). There are two types of organizational theories that can be used to make meaning of the culture within an organization. McGregor's (1960) theory is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs in addition to Theory X and Y. Theory X and Y emphasize the role of manager's assumptions on motivation and drive. More specifically, McGregor (1960) has proposed that a manager's assumptions about staff tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Theory X characterizes a culture in which the manager embraces a style that is based on coercion, tight control, threats, and punishment of the staff in order to achieve desired outcomes. On the other hand, Theory Y is based on the premise that the essential task of management is to arrange organizational conditions so that people can achieve their own goals best by directing their efforts toward organizational rewards. Theory Y resonated with my leadership philosophy and I felt that by building relationships with staff would create a culture grounded in student success. I was able to develop a professional relationship with my staff by conveying an attitude and perception of trust and respect (Gladwell, 2002). For example, two weeks before the alternative school opened for the fall school year one of my secretaries needed to leave work early. Her grandson did not have a ride home from daycare. I jokingly told her that if she was not out of the building in ten seconds I would dock her pay for failure to take care of family

matters. She laughed and said “thank you.” I was able to connect with my two administrative staff by supporting their values, which in this example was family.

It was more difficult to develop a positive relationship with my Math teacher, Mrs. Giglio, who was far less receptive to newcomers and change. I attributed this to her temperament and the fourteen years she worked in the program with minimal organizational change. Her resistance was exhibited both indirectly and directly in a variety of ways. For example, she was working side by side with newly hired teachers that were not tenured. Despite her expertise as a Math teacher, she worked independently and was resistant to collaboration with the new teachers. Another simple example that highlights her discomfort with my leadership is when she challenged my procedures for requesting time off from work. I gave her a gentle reminder of the time off policy and appealed to her strengths to utilize her skills as a veteran teacher to better the program. More specifically, the new teachers were working diligently to develop lesson objectives that would grab the attention of our unique student population. I continually tried to encourage Mrs. Giglio to use her experience to provide valuable insight into the culture of the school. Eventually, she met with the new teachers to discuss classroom techniques that she used to maximize academic instruction. Following this initial meeting, Mrs. Giglio and the new teachers developed a plan to consistently meet during their preparation period to review their lessons and discuss innovative teaching strategies. Both Mrs. Giglio and the other teachers derived satisfaction and skills from this new collaboration that, ultimately, benefited the students. When teachers perceive their job as a place of comfort they feel valued and productivity increases (Argyris, 1990).

In my role, I believed in order to change behavior patterns I needed to find ways to create a culture that lead teachers to think and feel that their job was rewarding and fun. I felt that it was essential that I find a way to empower my staff to be passionate, excited, and enthusiastic about working with this unique population. By involving my staff in the process of change, I tried to serve their needs as educators and support them on their path to mastery teaching. As a result, I made it a priority to consistently meet with my teachers, provide them with information that pertained to their content area, and encourage them to create new and innovative programs, projects, and community opportunities that fostered academic excellence. As such, we met once a week and used the time to discuss any concerns they were having in the building including, but not limited to, student grades, attendance, and behavior modification plans. In doing so, I tried to convey the sentiment that we were a team with one goal to provide a quality education to our students. Once they felt empowered, supported, and respected they were able to build an environment grounded in respect for students to learn.

In the institution of education, teachers who are highly skilled in their subject area can impact the students they teach. All teachers are certified and highly qualified pursuant to state certification standards. The leading influence in human resource according to Bolman and Deal (2006) was Maslow's approach founded in a hierarchy of human needs that when met reduced stress and increased self esteem, belongingness, and safety. Developing relationships with my staff allowed me to access each person's strengths and capitalize on their wealth of life experiences in serving our students.

The direct leadership structure of Wood Beach or the absence of any other administrators in the program meant that staff reported directly to me with problems or

concerns related to their jobs (Bolman & Deal, 2003). This structure provided me with multiple advantages as the Administrator. I was able to get teachers to do what was in the best interest of the student by reinforcing the mission and objectives of the school without any other competing agendas or directives administratively. Once the mission and values were conveyed and my relationships with staff were nurtured, they were able to function self sufficiently and rely on their professional skills, knowledge of content and build positive educational relationships with the students to meet their educational needs. When needed, the teachers collaborated on cross curricula lessons that were authentic, and provided students the opportunity to make real world connections from the instructional content. As a result, my teachers liked to come to work because they felt safe and supported. For example, a student was being disrespectful and used foul language toward a teacher. The teacher gave the student a choice to either stop communicating disrespectfully or go to the principal's office. The student did not like either option. I was made aware of the situation by the teacher and followed up with the student. I explained to him that we are not like your old school, we wanted the best for him and in order for him to continue to attend school he needed to apologize to the teacher. At the end of the day I met with the teacher and he informed me that the student did apologize. This situation exemplifies our ability to work collaboratively and consistently in line with similar values, policies and procedures to support the student body. I formed a group of like-minded staff who I believed had the best interest of the school at heart. According to Bolman and Deal (2003) and Argyris (1990) workers need to create groups within an organization that value the same concepts and this is done to provide a sense of comfort so that the worker can navigate through his or her day.



With exceptional leadership and support from Dr. Harvey combined with quality staff, students were provided the opportunity to obtain a quality education. I was able to utilize the building to accommodate the needs of the students. I created an extended day schedule students used to write resumes, study, research employment, and explore post-secondary opportunities. If not for his Dr. Harvey's support, students in the surrounding area would be denied the opportunity to pursue their career goals. At Wood Beach we were able to reduce students' stress and elevate their interest and value in education by making learning interesting and meaningful (Fullan, 2007). For example, many students had test anxiety, confidence issues regarding their ability to learn, and poor motivation prior to attending Wood Beach. In a parallel process, the confidence and eventual success of the staff was mirrored in the student body and Wood Beach gradually blossomed into a place that provided an educational haven for those seeking an alternative route to their high school diploma. Students were prepared for class, engaged in the education process, and completed their homework. The school embodied symbolic artifacts that represented the culture of the school and the people who worked within the organization.

### **Symbolic Frame**

Symbols embody and express an organization's culture: the interwoven patterns of beliefs, values, practices and artifacts that define for members who they are and how they are to do things (Bolman & Deal, 2003). My first impression of the Wood Beach building was dreary. The building provided an atmosphere that was less than enthusiastic, which was evident from the old paint, brown paneling, and the stained carpeting. In the history classroom we had outdated text books that did not provide information about contemporary history and current events. Organizations should organically change to

keep pace with student populations, teaching practices, and resources that reflect contemporary relevance. Organizations function like complex, constantly changing, organic pinball machines (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Historically, this atmosphere stimulated apathy resulting in a lack of change and growth. As the school leader, my actions and behaviors to update the environment from the walls to the furniture to the books would be observed by my staff and students and used to send non-verbal messages that promoted an ethic of care (Noddings, 2007).

My first symbolic message was conveyed by painting all of the classrooms. I met with our custodian, Mr. Jeff, who liked to paint and asked him if he would be willing to paint all of the classrooms. Mr. Jeff started painting the history classroom and, while painting, he asked me if he could create a mural of the sun and stars. I supported this idea and his creativity. When Mr. Jeff completed the painting, the students and staff expressed excitement about our fresh new décor.

Another symbolic message conveyed within our community was in regards to the importance of utilizing technology. The technology was old and the internet took a long time to load when students were researching assignments. I placed an order for new computers for our computer lab. I ordered five new computers with updated software so that students would have a place to complete their assignments in a timely manner. Teachers and students used the computer lab as a place for academic instruction. Students would tell me that they liked what I was doing to the school and teachers began to challenge students with authentic research assignments, which they found exciting.

To reduce damage to the rugs I ordered a plastic rug with our mascot, a Bronco, and the name of the school was written in the center of the rug. The rug was the first icon

the students and staff saw in the morning and the last image they viewed at the end of the day. The students began to identify with the mascot. For example, students made a small poster of the mascot and hung it on the wall of the computer lab.

Changes in the facility began to translate into changes in students' perception of the building and their behavior. The students' began to exhibit pride for the program and care for the staff. For example, students routinely cleaned up at the end of each day to reduce the work load for Mr. Jeff. The symbolic messages I attempted to convey through my non-verbal behavior had a positive ripple effect on every aspect of the program. This was the beginning of my change efforts in the program. As I struggled to gain a deeper understanding of Wood Beach, I began to realize that the organizational actors within the district could be helpful in providing me with an uncensored picture of the political structure.

### **Political Frame**

The political frame views organizations as living, breathing political arena that host a complex web of individual and group interests. Five propositions summarize this perspective: Organizations are coalitions of diverse individuals and interest groups; there are enduring differences among coalition members in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality; important decisions involve allocating scarce resources; scarce resources and enduring differences make conflict central to the organizational dynamics and underline power as the most important asset; goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among competing stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2003). After completing my organizational scan I then turned my attention to developing a vision for the school.

## **Transforming Culture**

**Charting the course of change.** I believed that to change culture I needed to utilize my skills as a transformational leader in order to alter organizational behavior. Wheatley (2006) stated that when new order is established a different culture emerges. The new culture was embedded in the vision that I developed. My vision was to provide an environment in which every person cared about his or her responsibilities within an organization. Sergiovanni (1994) stresses the importance of collaboration and interpersonal relationships. I was dedicated to providing a quality education for teenagers as well as young adults. I began to think about how to infuse my vision into the school, and eventually documented my thoughts. I wrote in my journal:

I believe that I have a vision that encourages growth and personal development in students and teachers. I want to make this school a place that excites students to attend and encourages teachers to be passionate about their work. I need to inspire people! I will use my vision as a guide to reflect upon throughout the year.

I wanted to provide the best program that would prepare students to effectively compete in twenty-first century society. The goal was to maintain a student centered program that focused on promoting self-esteem and academic achievement by identifying quality teachers that shared my philosophy. Argyris (1990) contends that when the vision of an organization is redefined, the malaise of ineffectiveness will decrease. For example, administrators that are sensitive to, have an understanding of, and are empathetic to the complexities that surround the life experiences manifested through the socio-economic status and life style of our students begin the process of change (Fullan, 2007). As a leader, it was important to learn, critically evaluate, and reverberate with everyone's

professional philosophy. More talented teachers and principals are needed to impact learning for all students (Fullan, 2007).

I sought to transform the culture by promoting professionalism amongst staff and their effectiveness within the organization. I believe that good leaders effectively empower their staff to be part of the organization. When people believe in the ideology of a concept, they will embrace the organization with feelings of self-efficacy which will result in an increase in effectiveness (Fullan, 2007). In order to have a successful organization each member within the organization needs to feel important and to be acknowledged, accepted, and valued.

It was vital to model the pillars of collaborative leadership to support, mentor, and develop staff. As a part of my vision, I identified a collaborative leadership approach for success and built a foundation based on intrinsic motivation. Sergiovanni (1994) explains “Extrinsic ties lead to calculated involvement. We remain tied to others and to our work as long as we continue to receive and value the rewards that someone else gives us. Intrinsic ties, by contrast lead to involvement that come from within (p.55).” I encouraged my staff, by valuing and capitalizing on their strengths. I sought to embrace the individual gifts that they possessed as educators. The transformational leadership approach was a useful means for conceptualizing leadership that helped me to focus on fostering motivation, genuine support, and concern (Sergiovanni, 2004). My vision for Wood Beach was achieved by developing an intrinsic desire in staff and students that fostered a culture conducive to learning. In order for me to create an effective school culture I needed to learn from the secretaries who were the “Gate Keepers” of information. I documented in my journal, some ideas to develop a new school culture.

This is a great opportunity for me to develop change in this new academic environment. I need to focus on the needs of the students, teachers and support staff. I will build relationships, provide support and resources for the teachers, and show students that I value them by creating a positive safe academic environment.

### **Social Justice Believers**

**Hiring process.** According to the superintendent the secretaries made the school work despite the ineffective leadership from the past administrator. Lina and Pam had been working in the district for 10 years. They had a wealth of experience which aided in my mission to develop a quality educational culture through leadership. On my first day, Dr. Harvey walked me over to the building where I was going to be working. As I opened the door to Wood Beach Lina was walking out of what looked like the science classroom and said “Good morning Dr. Harvey, is this the new principal?” He answered “Yes, ladies this is Mr. Jones and he will be working with you.” I introduced myself as the new Administrator and Lina and Pam replied “We have a lot of work to take care of and we want to be ready. So when you are ready we will catch you up on the registration process.” Prior to my arrival at Wood Beach, the non-instructional staff often complained to the Superintendent about the negative behavior of the students.

During my first week as Principal, the most informative meeting I had was with my Secretaries. They reported that they had struggled last year because they were taking on the responsibilities that they felt should have been administered by the Principal. At that point, it was clear that I needed a staff that was grounded in a social justice philosophy. I captured my thoughts, regarding my focus on changing student perceptions and developing teacher performance in my journal.

I will focus on students' behaviors that not only impact their education, but also have a lasting influence on their future. I will gather insight into what the teachers want as they are critical in the change process. I need to continue to utilize my secretaries to gather insight into past culture.

I wanted change and in order to facilitate the process of change I needed teachers who believed that social inequities that permeated Wood Beach could and would be changed. My discussion with Lina and Pam continued and included a sharing about their perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and what I should expect as the new administrator. Pam stated in a firm voice "Part of our job is to protect you so just let us do our job and we will give you all the credit." I was taken back by her statement. I have never been a person that took credit for the work of others. I replied 'Not good enough, either we all take credit for something or no one takes credit, your choice.'" Both Pam and Lina agreed with my sentiment. As I reflected on their statement I realized that our students were lucky to have people who cared about their job and the students they serve. I reflected on their statements and processed their thoughts in my journal.

I need to make sure that I support my secretaries, validate their concerns, and infuse them in the transformation process. I believe this will help to develop a sense of pride and commitment for our program. I believe this will help me gain a better understanding of the school climate. I need to work on a plan...

One day while Pam was showing me the basement we started talking about family and how family was important to quality performance at work. Pam turned around and said "I totally agree Mr. Jones, you might work out yet."

As we were walking upstairs to the main office I alluded to Pam that I may need her and Lina's support in hiring three new teachers. I documented in my journal, the importance of their feedback in the hiring process.

I will use the secretaries as part of my hiring process because they can provide questions to potential candidates from their past experiences in the school. In essence, they know what type of teaching style will be a good fit for our school. This decision allowed me to acknowledge Pam and Lina's input and nurture a team approach that I would strive to replicate in all parts of the program. Building a relationship with my Secretaries and enlisting their support in changing the culture of Wood Beach proved to be one of my wisest decisions during my tenure.

I continued my change efforts from a transformational approach by attempting to recruit teaching staff to participate in the hiring committee. Carl was a second year teacher in the district who taught English and was a part time country song writer. Mrs. Giglio, a Math teacher, had been teaching in the district for over 12 years. Lina and Pam stated that they were good teachers. However they further reported that it was difficult for them to teach due to student behavior problems that disrupted their classrooms. I set up a meeting with the two current teachers and shared that one of my priorities was to focus on better supporting the teachers in managing disruptive student behavior. Further, I reassured them that the behavior problems and negative school experiences that they experienced last year would be very different this coming Fall. Both Carl and Mrs. Giglio seemed excited and encouraged by our meeting. Amidst this positive interaction, I invited them to be a part of my hiring committee. They respectfully declined participation in the committee because they were hesitant to work over their summer vacations and wanted to



spend as much time with their families as possible. I respected their decision because this represented a core value for Mrs. Giglio and Carl and because I also valued my family time.

My assessment of the events that took place in the previous year generated a reflective frenzy in my head. I documented in my journal, my thoughts regarding the types of teachers I would need. “I need teachers who are not scared to work with this student population, who can inspire, and who are willing to provide opportunities that fosters positive teacher student relationships.”

I needed to hire three new teachers but without any past historical data to review I had to be creative in gathering as much data as possible to ensure that right teachers for our students. I met with Dr. Harvey and he explained to me that I needed to hire teachers that would set a tone grounded in education. I wanted teachers to model success for our students. The process of hiring would be guided by my desire to create a new thinking paradigm. Lina and Pam had the most experience and over 10 years in the district so I decided to include them on the hiring committee and incorporate their input into the hiring process. When I approached them with the idea they seemed confused and Lina restated my questions back to me. She began to stutter and then she said “You want me and Pam to be a part of your hiring committee, are you sure about that?” I responded with confidence and conviction “You are qualified, you know what works, and you ran this place last year.” Lina said “Okay.” She then blurts out “Did you check with Dr. Harvey?” I smiled and said “Dr. Harvey is in full support of my leadership ability so again, will you be on my hiring committee?” They both looked at one another and shrugged their

shoulders and said “Sure!” I realized they were willing to give me a chance to demonstrate my leadership ability.

Before we looked at resumes I decided to meet with Lina and Pam to discuss the type of teacher we were looking to hire and how they would fit into our educational culture. Sergiovanni (2007) asserts that teachers who develop non-judgmental student relationships can foster a positive learning experience. Given I was new to the program, I needed the experience of my Secretaries to develop a framework of what worked and what needed to be changed. Lina reported that we needed teachers who were not scared of students. She explained that the principal last year was frightened of the students and, as a result, shied away from confronting problem behavior. Pam provided clarity as to why we need teachers that have the ability to work with this population stating, “I think that we need teachers that are highly qualified, can relate to our students, with effective classroom management skills.” Lina chimed in and stated “Yes! No more breaking up fights, being disrespected by students, and no more drug dealing!” They provided clear and concise parameters that I was able to use to develop a list of questions to interview prospective teachers and to identify the qualities we are looking to identify in the those that we needed to recruit. We needed to hire a Science teacher, a Business teacher, and a History teacher.

My secretaries had twenty years of combined experience so it was clear that I needed their input if I was going to develop change. I directed Lina and Pam to develop ten questions that reflected the experience and teaching skills we were hoping to attract. After meeting with my secretaries I went to the board office to collect the resumes that had been accumulating in my mailbox. Later that afternoon I began to review the resumes

and set up interviews. In my journal, I expressed my feelings and thoughts regarding my process of change.

Things are looking good and I am glad that I have the opportunity to create change. This is a great opportunity for me to bring much needed change into this organization. I am excited that the secretaries have embraced my leadership and willing to explore new ways of creating change. The attitude of the secretaries is exciting!

First, I organized the resumes according to the position they applied for and compiled three groups. I further refined the resumes based on several factors such as years of teaching experience, certification status, and overall qualifications. At the end of the day I let Lina and Pam know that I looked over the resumes and needed them to set up interviews within the week.

I decided to begin the interview process on Friday. On the first day of interviews Lina, Pam and I were prepared with our respective list of interview questions. The majority of the candidates did not have what we needed in terms of experience with this population. At the end of a very frustrating day Lina was at her desk and a potential candidate was on the phone and explained that he finished his tour of duty with the Marine Corps and want to know if we were still hiring for the position of History teacher. Lina said “yes please hold.” She called me into her office and asked me if we wanted to interview a person from the Army. I eagerly told Lina to set up the interview as soon as possible. She set the interview for Monday at 10:00 am. When she got off of the phone she asked me why was I so anxious to get this person in for an interview? I did not want to tell her why, however I promised I would on Monday.

Over the weekend I reflected on the week and what I learned about myself. I learned that the students that I wanted to impact personally affected me. I saw myself in my students. I believe that passion for students that are disengaged from the learning process required a unique teacher that can meet students at their educational level while understanding their unique situation. As I reflected on the type of teacher that would best fit our population I was surfing the television and the movie “Lean on Me” starring Morgan Freeman was on and I began to watch how he and the teachers were taking an active interest in their students. The movie was based on a true story about the educational problems that invaded the Paterson Public Schools during the nineteen eighties. As I sat on my couch and watched the movie I began to understand what I was looking for in a teacher. I documented my thoughts in my journal. “They need to possess the ability to teach and the passion to inspire! I am clear on the type of teacher that will best work within our educational system.” I could not wait to meet with my hiring committee to explain why I was so eager to set up the interview with the soldier from the Marine Corps.

Monday morning we scheduled three interviews and added the military candidate from Friday to our list of applicants. At 2 pm our fourth candidate Mr. Cook walked through our doors with a clean hair cut, three piece suit, and a portfolio resume. At the beginning of the interview Mr. Cook took charge and began telling us why he would be a good fit in our school. He explained that many of the soldiers he commanded in Iraq had problems in school and many hated school. He commanded their respect by supporting them and finding jobs and situations in which they would excel. After the interview Lina and Pam understood why I wanted to interview Mr. Cook and both agreed that he would

be our history teacher. Later that day, Pam called Mr. Cook and offered him the position. He eagerly accepted.

With one position filled we set up interviews for the Science and Business teacher vacancies. Pam received a call from a man, Steve Hut, that wanted to come in for an interview the following week, but we asked him if he could come in that day in an effort to expedite the hiring process. With the school year starting we needed to maximize every opportunity. Steve explained that he was at a local beach and did not have any professional clothes to wear to an interview that day. Pam placed Mr. Hut on hold and asked me what to do. I directed Pam to tell him to come in and not to worry about his appearance. Mr. Hut reluctantly agreed to come in for an interview at 4 pm. Mr. Hut arrived at 4 pm sharp and when I met him at the main entrance he uttered in a joking manner “I have on a polo shirt does that help?” We both laughed and I said “thank you for coming in on such short notice.” The interview went well and we began talking about teaching methodology. He said “life is about risk. When I was in the business world, I risked everything and opened my own business at a time in my life when I should have been more conservative.” His statement resonated with me and my mind became flooded with all of the risky decisions I made to get to that very point in my life. For example, when I decided to enter graduate school, I did not know if I possessed the ability necessary to compete academically. I replied “How did it work out for you?” He said “That is why I am here.” We both laughed and I said that we would let him know my decision by the end of the week. Lina and Pam indicated that they liked him and wanted to hire him. I felt the same way and directed Lina to call him right away and offer him the job. He accepted! I thought that Steve had something that went beyond just teaching,

developing lesson plans and managing the classroom. He had real life experience that I felt our students could learn from.

Hiring a Science teacher so late in the summer was a challenge because Science teachers are in high demand in public school education. As the week came to an end we had one week to find a Science teacher before school started. At this point in the hiring process we were feeling confident that we knew what we were looking for and were eager to wrap things up. We reviewed the list of applicants and whittled the list down to three people. We had a young female, a male candidate fresh out of college and older gentleman named Mark Findly who graduated from the University of Ohio around the same time I was born. We interviewed all three and we all agreed that Mark was the best candidate. He was offered the job the next day and he also accepted! We offered the job to Mark because he had experience as a scientist, was not afraid of the students, and believed that every student had the potential to learn.

Given that I was fully staffed, I began to think about how to consistently address my students' needs. Academically, I wanted to provide a demanding and diversified curriculum that focused on mastery of content which would prepare students for educational opportunities after high school. The entire faculty was sensitive to the unique needs of our student population. As the instructional leader my goal was to hire teachers that could build trust, respect, and demonstrate consistency with students. I felt that the staff I hired consisted of like minded individuals who shared the same values. They were committed to respecting the rights and feelings of all students. My faculty and I believed in active participation, teacher and student involvement in the community, and that creating a safe environment would stimulate learning. Fullan (2007) asserts that

“successful implementation consists of some transformation or continual development of initial ideas.” If making connections can offer students the opportunity to become successful, then the effort to change was just as important as the process of change. I hired teachers that would expose students to information that motivated them to engage in the learning process. Argyris (1990) asserts giving approval to staff will reduce feelings of hurt and promote positive creativity. I finished the hiring process just in time to begin the process of registering our students for the new school year.

**The registration process.** One morning in late August I was organizing my desk and Pam and Lina walked into my office and asked me if I knew how we registered students. My response was “No.” They spent two hours showing me the process. Pam and Lina explained to me that the most important part of the registration process was the initial interaction with the student and their parents. Pam and Lina told me that I would get a significant amount of information regarding why they left school, family issues, and any social issues that have affected their life. This proved to be valuable advice and further shaped my roles as the Principal.

My office was adjacent to the main office and served as a reception area for the students when they arrived to register. The first day of registration I was greeted by a mother and her daughter with a pleasant “Good morning, is this where we register?” I replied “Yes, please come in and sit down.” She stated “My name is Kista and this is my mother.” Kista and her mother were originally from Pakistan. Kista reported that she left her high school because had a high number of absences due to illness which impacted her ability to complete her school work and receive the credits she needed to graduate. Her Mother stated that she believed Kista was smart, but had a lot of problems getting up in

the morning for school. At this point I was confused and asked “Is she here because she is chronically sick, because she can not get up for school in the morning, or a combination of both?” Kista replied “One affects the other Mr. Jones,” I handed Kista and her Mother the registration documentation to fill out. I reassured Kista and her Mother that I would be willing to develop a schedule that would fit her individual needs. Kista’s Mother seemed pleased and supported Kista’s decision to attend our non-traditional program. As they left her Mother asked Kista to wait in the car and came back into my office. She stated in a soft voice “Mr. Jones, for the first time in my daughter’s high school career she seems excited about school again...thank you.” I explained that it was our job to meet the individual needs of our students regardless of their circumstances.

Reflecting on my interaction with Kista and her Mother, I realized that I wanted to be positive and supportive of her needs. The frustration I saw on her Mother’s face and the dejected frown Kista was wearing stimulated a response that prompted me to think about how to support her needs from an ethic of care (Noddings, 2007). I felt confident that if Kista could not finish the year I would assist her family in connecting her with a program that could accommodate her needs. I realized that in order to change the culture of the school it needed to start with my interactions with the students. Kista and her Mother completed their registration packet and handed it to me before they left. As they walked out the door, a young gentleman walked causally in to the main entrance.

When John walked into my office he stiffened up and became guarded as if I was going to tell him something that he did not want to hear. I began the conversation with “Good morning, here to register?” The student replied “My name is John and I was here last year.” At first glance, it appeared as though John was using drugs. He seemed



confused and his eyes were wide and tired. When I asked him if he needed a pen he looked at me, paused for a moment, and said in a monotone voice “No, I have one.” I went to the filing cabinet to look up his name. I found his file and returned to my office where John was sitting. I explained to him that he needed twenty credits to graduate. He replied “I know.” I replied “John, why did you leave your high school?” He responded “I hated the teachers, they fuckin’ didn’t care about me - so why go.” I was thinking to myself that this man hated the educational process because trained professionals could not meet his needs. He filled out the paperwork with no problem, handed it to my secretary and said “See you when school starts.” I got the sense that John wanted to learn but was angry and perturbed with the traditional learning process. I believed that my best response to John was to show him respect. I asked a question and did not judge his response. John seemed confident in his ability to graduate from the way he breezed through his paperwork. As I watched John walk out of the building Lina told me that John was a violent person and had the potential to turn our school into a dysfunctional program. I responded “But if we can get him to buy into our program think about how well it would run.”

What really tugged at my emotional fabric was a student that arrived to register that I once taught and had a lot of promise. I was faced with my past and present and future with this next student. When he walked into my office he looked familiar, but I could not place his face. He walked into my office and said “Hi my name is Mike and I would like to register for school.” When I looked up from my desk his face was recognizable and I just looked at him for a minute and before I could ask him a question he said “Did you work in another school district?” I replied in an inquisitive voice “Yes”

and at the same time we both said “Red Town!” I said, “Mike what happened? I thought for sure you would be in your sophomore year of college by now.” He reported that he had been taking care of his Grandmother and missed too many days of school. As a result, he did not have enough credits to graduate. He further reported that he was working nearby and wanted to finish school and move on with his life. I said, “If you put in the work I will support you in any way that I can.” He said “Thanks Mr. Jones. I really want to get my high school diploma.” As Mike left my office I sat at my desk wondering how a promising student could fall through the cracks. Mike’s specific situation saddened me because he was one of my students, he was bright, and we grew up on the same side of Red Town.

As the registration process continued, I made sure that I met every student and parent who walked through my doors to begin the process of building relationships and developing a positive school culture that was student centered. During the registration process, themes of family problems, drug issues, and legal involvement emerged. One evening while journaling I realized through reflection that my students were not wanted by their former school districts. As I contemplated that thought I felt anxious and excited. Anxious because all of my students were tough and struggled academically, excited because of the opportunity I was given to change the lives of students who were not successful in a traditional academic model. As the school year began, I made it a daily practice to greet each student everyday they arrived at school and worked to develop flexible schedules to meet their individual circumstances. Any mission that is valuable starts with a vision that interconnects people (Collins, 2001).

The adult students were focused and ready to finish high school. They came in the school, registered for school and left. The younger students, between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, who were in the program the previous year would be the focus of my attention. We finished the registration process two weeks before school began. During that two week period, Lina, Pam, and I caught up on paperwork, ordered books and supplies, and made sure that the facility was ready and the landscape was groomed. One afternoon I was on the phone with the maintenance department and Lina knocked on my office door. I finished up my phone call and asked Lina if she needed anything. She said “No.” At the end of the day I retreated to my office and reflected on my leadership approach. I began to understand that my approach to change impacted the staffs’ perception of the upcoming school year. I realized that they believed in me and were willing to take risks to foster change. I left that day feeling empowered because I was able to develop trust from my most experienced staff. As the school year approached, I focused my attention on refining policies that would help to transform the culture within the building.

### **Fundamental Leadership**

**New policies and practices.** In the first week of September and I decided to write policy that would impact culture and support an atmosphere that reflected a positive environment. I used a transactional leadership perspective to implement my vision for change. Changing behavior, policy, and culture are fundamental elements of progressive behavior that move from status quo toward change that will increase academic performance (Fullan, 2007). The field of education lacks a clear and consistent definition of school culture. The term has been used synonymously with a variety of concepts,

including "climate," "ethos," and "saga" (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The culture of Wood Beach was directly impacted by hiring practices and the introduction of new faculty that shared a common ideology. Scholars have argued about the meaning of *culture* for centuries. Noted anthropologist Geertz (1973), has made a large contribution to our current understanding of the term. Geertz has reported that culture represents a "historically transmitted pattern of meaning." Those patterns of meaning are expressed both (explicitly) through symbols and (implicitly) in our taken-for-granted beliefs. Despite feelings of uncertainty, I was willing to take risks on my leadership journey to benefit the program. I reflected on many of my decisions which helped me develop healthy communication with staff, implement new policies, and encourage staff to build positive relationships with students that fostered rewarding educational experiences.

During my tenure as Principal, I realized that there was a constant interplay between culture and leadership. Leaders create mechanisms for cultural development and reinforce the norms and behaviors expressed within the boundaries of the culture. Cultural norms arise and change based on where leaders focus their attention, how they react to crises, the behaviors they model, and who they attract to their organizations. The characteristics and qualities of an organization's culture are taught by its leadership and eventually adopted by its followers (Bass & Avolio, 1993). As I examined my leadership and how it affected the culture of the Wood Beach Alternative High School I became keenly aware of the key role I played in providing quality curriculum, monitoring and evaluating teacher performance and creating an environment that was safe for my students.

Creating a policy that would assist in establishing a culture that was safe for students and staff was my first priority. I stated in my journal, how my policies would be implemented which enabled me to establish new school culture.

I need to develop policies that impact school culture, must support achievement, and needs to be embraced by the entire staff. Make sure to have open dialogue with staff to illicit meaningful feedback. Encourage their input and validate that what they are discussing is meaningful to me.

I shared with my staff that I would deal with all discipline problems. However, I also conveyed the notion that it was their responsibility to teach, monitor student behavior, and notify me when negative behaviors distracted the educational process. To develop change I wanted to model how to address students in a positive, caring, yet firm matter. I believed staffing being firm, fair and consistent. I am asked my teachers to follow my directions, new policies, and teach students which is a part of their contractual agreement. If they were not performing their duties then they were in breach of their contractual obligations. My faculty did not see the logic in encouraging open dialogue grounded in respect; nevertheless through policy I required all teachers to begin to model a teaching style that fostered personal teacher student growth through trust (Fullan, 2007).

I also focused my efforts on changing the dress code policy. Most of our students only wore a shirt and tie or a skirt and a blouse at a church, wedding, or funeral. They did not see people well dressed in their everyday lives. Male faculty were required to wear a shirt and tie, and female faculty were required to dress in skirts, professional pants or slacks, shoes, and blouse. This change in policy enlisted the teachers and staff in

modeling for students how to dress for a job interview, high school graduation, and future success throughout their life. This change in the dress code also promoted an air of respect between and amongst students and staff. I believed that if we served as positive role models for students, they would begin to gain self-respect and understand the basic soft skills essential to obtaining employment. As I reflected further, I realized that I wanted to change the students' perception of the school. If teachers look successful and care enough to dress with pride and value, then students would also feel valuable. Our students would learn through the modeling of our staff what is appropriate for a job interview, formal engagements, and social functions. A dress code was more than a policy it was the opportunity to provide life skills to our students. For example, many of our students rarely wear a tie, but with caring teachers as role models they could provide opportunities to teach young men to importance of tying a tie. I felt that these were critical life lessons that would help out students succeed well beyond the borders of our classrooms.

The next policy I introduced simply targeted how students were given written feedback about their school assignments. Many of our students were not successful in a traditional educational model. There are triggers that associate school with positive and negative feelings. Providing students with written feedback in red pens can create feelings of failure for those who did not experience success in school. This may seem insignificant; however many of our students received failing grades in their traditional educational environments. I implemented a policy that prohibited teachers from using red pens. I remembered the red pen when I was in school. I often wondered why the teacher would write corrections on my paper with red ink when she had at least five blue or black

pens in her cup holder. As I reflected on this policy and the profound effect it had on me, I decided to collect all the red pens in the building. I did not want any work completed by students corrected in red pen. The teachers could and would provide the same feedback to students in blue, black, purple, and green ink.

Another policy I created was guided by my belief that it was essential for all students to refrain from using foul and disrespectful language. My personal belief is that people are always being evaluated whether they know it or not. Our students were starting their life from different points along life's race track. If our students were going to compete they needed to become fundamentally sound by developing basic social skills before they could be considered for employment. Negative language in an academic setting is disrespectful and I was not going to tolerate that type of communication. Through my reflective lens I believed that if they did not talk disrespectfully in front of their parents they were not going to speak in a vulgar manner in school. If students spoke in a manner that undermined the educational process and students were not learning then we were no different than their traditional school. Wood Beach Adult School was an environment that allowed for social, educational and emotional growth for all students. I did not think that condoning negative or inappropriate language in the classroom was aligned with my vision for the school. The teaching staff supported this policy and rallied behind me. Mr. Hut said "To begin the change start with what comes out of their mouth!" I resonated with Mr. Hut and I encouraged my teachers not to accept any disrespectful language. I was clear that I did not want to hear any cursing, sexual discussions, or talking in a way that would be considered broken English. Broken English is a question or statement in a dislocated text. For example if a student was asking a question in broken

English they would say “What that is your doing.” If a student was unable ask a question appropriately then how were they going to answer a question in an interview, college admissions committee, or to a superior? If unacceptable language was heard by the teacher they were instructed to send the student to my office. I recorded clearly, in my journal how to model the management of disciplinary issues.

I will address discipline because I have the opportunity to model ways to positively redirect student behavior. My goal will be to model discipline so that teachers will follow. This will allow the opportunity for teachers to practice my discipline strategies and manage their classroom effectively.

As the instructional leader my tone of leadership needed to be valued by my staff. I wanted my staff to understand that education provided skills beyond our school doors. Teaching employability skills provided students with the essentials to secure a job, appropriately communicate to others, and present themselves in a manner that communicated success. I made it clear to my staff and the students that the new policies were not open for discussion. I attempted to provide a context by conveying the notion that students needed to find relevance in learning and job placement, post-secondary opportunities and trade schools required appropriate physical presentation and professional communication skills. However, it was my responsibility to persuade my staff to embrace my organizational changes.

### **Servant of Change**

**Meaningful student interactions.** During the first three months of the school year I learned that our students were beginning to embrace the policies of the school. The leaves were falling, the morning air was chilly and crisp, and our first big family holiday



was two weeks away. Thanksgiving was a time that sparked emotions in some students and staff. As I continued to develop culture through my leadership it was important to understand what my staff valued. I took a genuine interest in the lives of my staff. In my journal, I wrote about my vision for a positive school atmosphere. "I believe authenticity will foster a healthy atmosphere. Creating a sense of camaraderie is central for my building to function effectively and meet the needs of our students." The school was packed with students who were loud, rowdy, and obnoxious to say the least. I figured if they wanted to know anything about me I needed to create a venue for communication. I announced to the students that I would be available if anyone needed to talk to me. I then stated "If I can be of help please stop by my office." I then let the teachers begin their day and went to my office to begin working on curriculum.

After I was in my office for a few minutes I heard loud cursing coming from the classroom behind my office. As I entered the classroom three students were talking about drugs, sex, and making money illegally. I reminded the students that we have a language policy and that our school is not the place for negative dialogue. All three students agreed and said that they would not do it again. It was less than a minute when I heard the same group of students begin to do exactly what I asked them not to do. I walked out of my office and I called all of the students into the hallway. I stated "I made it very clear that this is a place for learning, not a lounge to discuss what you did over the weekend." At this point I needed to be bold but not punitive. I then stated "If you want to graduate this year it is important for you to get focused on your work early so that you are not rushing in June to get all of your assignments done." As I read the affect of the room, students were not fazed by my directive and a few waved me off as if to say "beat it dude." I was

nervous and then I stepped out of my comfort zone and stated in a firm voice “If you do not want to be here you can leave. I only want students that want to be here and care about their education. If don’t like it the door is behind you.” I then sent the students back to their classrooms with their teachers and walked to my office. The rest of the day I did not have any more problems with those particular students.

When I closed my office door I could swear that I felt my heart pounding out of my chest. I did it; I set a limit, a foundation, a boundary that I hoped would continue to grow as I continued to cultivate the school culture. I was proud of myself for stepping out into the line of teenage insecurity, narcissism, and sarcasm to promote student success. At the end of the day I greeted every student on their way out of the building. When all of the students were gone I walked into my office and closed the door. A few minutes later there was a knock on my office door and to my surprise it was my Secretaries who asked if I was ok. I stated “Yes, thank you for asking; by the way ladies we have a lot of work to do this year.” In my building I empowered all staff from the custodian to the teachers to believe in their ability to educate, build relationships and create a healthy environment for students.

Later that day, my Science teacher was on his way from the main office and stopped into my office to ask what time I was leaving. He needed to work with a student after school. He was not contracted to work after 4:00 o’clock. I told him “I will be here for as long as you need me to be.” Two very interesting things came out of that afternoon’s instructional session with the Science teacher and the student he was teaching. First, the student was not the nicest and the most kind. In fact, I had to address her attitude and behavior several times and she was a part of the group that I had to

address earlier that day. When the Science teacher worked with the student individually and supported her education, her negative behavior started to decrease. In fact, the student walked into my office, knocked on my door, and said “Mr. Jones do you have a minute?” I said “Yes, come in.” What happened next made me believe that I was doing something right. She wanted to know what I thought about her going to college. I told her with a strong confident tone in my voice “I believe you can go to any college if you do the work.” She said, “That brings me to my next question, “I need to work on my assignments and I was wondering if the Science teacher would be available to help me?” I said, “Go and ask him if he can help you and if he can’t, then we will learn Science together.” Not only did my Science teacher support the student’s education he created additional study sessions for this student after school. Sergiovanni (1994) contends that advocates firmly believe that all students can and will learn given the right environment. I noted in my journal, my feelings regarding the commitment of the Science teacher.

I had a great day today. My Science teacher seems to understand that our success is embedded in the achievements of our students. I am very proud of him. His enthusiasm and willingness to accommodate the needs of our students is a positive step in changing culture. I will continue to encourage and support teachers. I think that my leadership style is impacting culture and teachers seem motivated.

Fara was a special education student, found school very challenging. She needed twenty one credits and felt that she would not graduate. She stated to me “Mr. Jones, I feel stressed about school all of the time and I can’t focus. Do you think I can do it?” I explained to her that failure was not an option and I would do anything to support her

education. I am a special education student and I always felt dumb. I told her to stop using her special education label to hide behind the hard work she would have to put forth in order to graduate. She stated to me “Okay Mr. Jones I’ll keep working hard and see what happens.” As I documented my feelings in my journal, I clearly stated my accomplishments.

I feel a sense of accomplishment and excitement running simultaneously throughout my body. As I think about my accomplishments I am realizing that my students want to learn and achieve. I feel a significant responsibility to support their educational goals. It has become clear to me that Fara wants to be just as successful as any other student, and is willing to make the commitment to achieve.

Sunday morning as I began my day, I reflected on how to continue to develop an atmosphere that fostered educational development and manage my feelings of anxiety. I needed my students to see past the trees of failure and into the clearing of success. For example, I had a student, Frank, who was very disrespectful, disruptive, rude, and at times verbally abusive to my staff. On the other hand he had a father that was supportive, kind, and loved his son very much. I quickly determined that a rigid approach with this student would not be my best course of action. Collins (2001) explains that the reality of a situation is important, because the leader in an organization is responsible for everyone. The brutal fact was that my staff needed to see how I addressed this particular student by modeling the approach I expected. All disciplinary behaviors regarding Frank were brought to my attention and I addressed the issues one by one in a thoughtful deliberate manner. I wanted my staff to learn how to address challenging student issues by

modeling behavior modification strategies. Boyatzis and Mckee (2005) assert that when staff senses that their leader is excited and hopeful, they feel invigorated and motivated. Boyatzis and Mckee further contend that when leaders exude enthusiasm, realistic optimism, and genuine concern for the people they value they have more energy for their work and can face challenges more creatively. When my staff believed I supported them they responded to my leadership by embracing my strategies for change. I was not willing to give up on Frank and I met with his father on several occasions regarding his behavior. He revealed to me that Frank did not get any credits last year yet had the highest attendance rate of any student in the program.

When Frank came to school I would make it a point to sit next to him and ask if he needed anything and his response was “Hell no man get the hell out of here,” and I would say “Okay, but watch your mouth do you understand?” I would not leave until he said he understood and most of the time he would say okay unless he was fighting with his father. Throughout the year Frank earned 60 credits and was hoping to graduate. I described in my audio journal, how to create an environment that was supportive.

I am continuing to develop an atmosphere that fosters educational development and manage my feelings of anxiety. I need my students to see past the trees of failure and into the clearing of success. I have a student, Frank, who is very disrespectful, disruptive, rude, and at times verbally abusive to my staff. On the other hand he has a father that is supportive, kind, and loves his son very much. A rigid approach with this student would not be my best courses of action. I think it is important to hold him accountable, and explain to him why his behavior is negatively impacting his life.

Later that month, he was arrested for drug use and placed in a rehabilitation center in another state. Although he was not able to graduate, I set the tone for my staff that conveyed the idea that we needed to face the challenges that our students present to us. Change can happen if we as a faculty are working together for the common good of the students. I wanted my staff to believe that there is nothing we could not achieve together. Boyatzis and Mckee (2005) assert that the resonant leader inspires an organization to reach for new ideas that even a few years ago were impossible. I believed that the environment in my building needed to change through my leadership. I turned to Dr. Harvey who provided meaningful feedback that aided in the change process.

### **Central Office Backing**

Central office support impacted my success at Wood Beach. Dr. Harvey, the Superintendent, was an excellent mentor. He would stop by my office and provide information on new leadership strategies and recommend leadership training that he thought would be beneficial to me. Dr. Harvey was able to educate me about ways to address core issues at Wood Beach providing me with resources on teacher and administrative professional development, and assisting me with problem solving. I remembered that he would always tell me to never solve a problem that would create five more. I believed his influence prepared me for my leadership experience. I never forgot the story he told me about the climate of the school before I arrived. One day after my students left for the day he was on his way back from a meeting and asked me if I had time to meet. I told him I was free to meet so he came over and started to talk about some issues he had the previous year. He explained that he had to call the police on several occasions because students were out of control. Dr. Harvey continued by telling me that

he was called everyday regarding the out of control behavior of the students. He stated “LeRoi, since you have been here I have not had one call.” I replied “Thank you.” As he was on his way out of my office he said “LeRoi if you need anything please feel free to stop in.” Dr. Harvey provided a blueprint for leadership that was rooted in basic respect and trust. I articulated my thoughts, regarding Dr. Harvey in my journal.

Dr. Harvey reminds me of a football coach that is always teaching me how to improve. His support helps me to navigate through the tough times as the instructional leader. I think that all new administrators need someone who can support and direct them as they grow as a leader. I understand that I do not know everything and I am glad that I have a veteran school leader to support me. I think that good leaders need someone like Dr. Harvey to be a sounding board for ideas.

His trust in me allowed me to develop a leadership foundation that grew through our professional relationship during my experience at Beach Wood. With his support, I felt strong *enough* to face the challenges related to changing the culture at Wood Beach. It was January before I took a moment to reflect and realized that my students were attending school, participating in class discussions, and working independently.

My students felt comfortable talking to me because I was willing to listen (Greenleaf, 1978). One day a student named Sheryl wanted to talk to me regarding her parents. We began to talk about her parents divorce. They had placed Sheryl in the middle of their domestic issues. Sheryl told me “They fight constantly and my Mother who is home and not working always tries to hurt my Father by saying something mean. She told him that I couldn’t stand him and I wish he would just leave us alone”. I asked “Does your father live at home or do you visit him on weekends?” She replied “I go to

visit my father. He has a new born and is remarried and doesn't have time to spend with me. I feel that I am in the middle, causing frustration that disrupts my schoolwork. I hate feeling this way. If I don't graduate, I will be devastated. I could never go back to my high school because they don't care about my life." I chimed in and said "Wait in my office for a moment while I get your transcript from your file." I retrieved her documentation and returned to my office. I stated "Sheryl, you need fifteen credits to graduate and you have already completed five credits and you are working on English and Algebra currently." Sheryl asked "If I graduate do you think I could get a job and go to college?" I emphatically responded "I think that you can do what ever you put your mind to if you work at it."

As Sheryl was leaving my office I noticed that Rena, a sophomore, was walking in to register for school. It was a cold January morning and she finally came in and talked to me about why she stopped coming to school. Rena reported that she was having a problem with her family. Her mother was fighting with her. Rena was back and forth between Brooklyn and New Jersey and working at a local store to pay bills while living with her Grandmother. She expressed that her father had passed away and she was struggling with his loss. I encouraged my staff to develop positive relationships with Rena so that she would have an opportunity to talk about her feelings. I reflected upon, and provided evidence of issues that effected student performance in my journal.

Students have emotional issues that are effecting their education. They deal with tremendous emotional pain and do not have the coping skills or the resources to address their needs. I am not sure how to address this issue. Maybe it would be a



good idea to encourage students to talk with staff or someone in our building that they feel comfortable discussing their personal issues with.

The atmosphere at Wood Beach was changing. Students were engaged in the learning process and over thirty students had already completed their course requirements for graduation and were in the process of looking for jobs or post-secondary opportunities. The program was running well. For the most part, my staff was doing a great job, students were learning, communicating their feelings and accepting constructive criticism. We had a few students who continued to resist the new atmosphere of the school and would try to disrupt the educational process. Jeff was one of those students who had a tremendous amount of potential but would not focus his talents. I would often have teachers complaining about him and they did not know what to do. I used this opportunity to model the behavior that I expected from my staff. When he was directed to my office I would address his negative behaviors. I wanted my staff to know that being effective is not easy and we needed to develop strategies to address the tough students to change the culture. Jeff would be held accountable for his behavior; however I had no intentions of expelling him. If I did that then I was no different from the traditional educational model. In trying to better meet Jeff's needs, we developed a personalized education schedule to accommodate his schedule. After we developed his schedule, he was less disruptive and began to participate in class discussions, projects, and complete his written assignments.

Sergiovanni (1994) reshapes the traditional educational paradigm which he describes as formal, relationship free and detached from the ever changing student populations to one that provides meaningful strategies that are full of valuable

information. Sergiovanni provided examples of successful schools that emphasize community as a central theme. My approach toward a school community in Wood Beach provoked new thinking and strategies. A new set of organizational constructs began to take shape such as promoting a positive school climate coupled with teaching values that will shape one's life. In my journal, I analyzed the behaviors of the teachers and students.

The negative behaviors of students that were prevalent in past years are starting to diminish. Teachers are positive, focused, and prepared for their students. Students are attentive, prepared for class, and asking stimulating questions. Change is slow, however I will continue to support staff and students through my leadership.

I consistently challenged teachers to develop innovative strategies to create a healthy school environment that fostered caring, learning, student centered instruction, and staff safety. I think true success comes from challenging people to reach their full potential. My teachers were change agents who fostered an educational structure focused on a new and meaningful student centered culture. It was clear from the behaviors of the students that they felt safe and comfortable in school. They were respectful, were able to talk about their personal lives with staff, and actively engaged in class assignments.

One situation I experienced was unforgettable as it meant both ethically and morally. Vern needed a letter stating that he was enrolled in school and was attending regularly to obtain public assistance so that he would not get kicked out of his home. He asked me for the letter and, given I was new, spoke to Lina about his request to get a better perspective on the situation. As the student left for class, Lina walked in and said in a stern and frustrated voice "Let me guess he wanted a letter so that he would not get kicked out of his house." I said "Yes, how did you know that. Could you hear me?" She said "No, I

know that student, and he is a sneaky kid and if I were you I would not write that letter.” Social Services would sometimes request a letter of enrollment from the school the student is attending to qualify them to receive public assistance. In a cool and calm voice I said “Thank you for your insight - I will take it under consideration.” I felt like I was in a predicament; I had a student that needed me to write him a letter or he would get kicked out of his house and my secretary that does not want me to write the letter. I thought to myself, “What do I do?”

At 2:30 pm Vern knocked on my door and asked for the letter. I handed him an envelope with the documentation he requested. My Secretary was so mad at my decision she finished the day and did not say goodnight. At the end of the day I found myself thinking “What happened today? They don’t teach you this stuff in graduate school.” Vern did not come back to school and I could not get in touch with him. I felt dumb, yet conflicted. How could I follow my Secretary’s advice and potentially leave one of my students homeless? What I discovered was that Vern had done the exact same thing last year. For days I asked myself how I could be so gullible to let this student manipulate me. Vern returned to school three weeks later and I immediately asked him to meet with me about his absences. I was firm and clear about what I expected from him if he was to continue to be a part of our school. I stated, “Vern I feel like you manipulated me to write you that letter so that you would have some place to stay and you are not even attending school on a regular basis”. I explained, “If you want to graduate you need to attend everyday or I will call social services and tell them that you are not attending school regularly.”

I had no intentions of making that phone call and as soon as those words left my mouth he stormed out of my office. I thought to myself, “What do I do now?” For days I felt paralyzed by the choices placed in front of me. Vern was not a bad person. He just does not like school. On the other hand if I do nothing I could set a precedent for other students in his situation. I had to ask myself what am I trying to accomplish and do the ends justify the means. Emotionally I was torn between Vern’s unique situation and my own set of values that are based on the principles of “above all, do no harm”. The emotional pain disrupted my life. I lost six pounds and was averaging three hours of sleep a night. After painful reflection, I decided to make the phone call to social services. In my journal, I explained why I made the phone call.

I do not want to make this student’s life more difficult than it already is, however the world is a demanding place. I feel like I am hurting this student if I don’t make the call. I think that I will cause more problems if I do nothing and let him get away with this behavior. Yes, make the phone call and let the student be held accountable for his decision.

I spoke to a woman named Kathy and she advised me to send a letter to Vern’s house urging him to come to school. I mailed the letter as requested and asked Kathy if she would be willing to follow up with a phone call to Vern. In the following days and weeks, Vern was in school more often and made every effort to finish his work so that he could graduate in June. As I was driving home that night I felt a large weight lifted from my chest. My Secretary was still not talking to me so I decided to meet with her and encouraged her to be honest with me regarding her feelings about my choices. She was

candid and questioned my leadership style. I replied, “I must admit, I was questioning my leadership too”.

My students tried to challenge the policies and procedures of my school. During one interaction it was reported to me that Keith and Kianna tried to leave school by sneaking out the back of the school to smoke a cigarette. They were caught by Mr. Cook and sent to me. The students were addressed on the issue, the school policies were reiterated, and I called their guardians. While sitting in my office they began to get angry and their tone became aggressive. I interjected and explained to the students, “Please do not raise your voice, because I have not raised my voice at you.” I did not suspend the students however; they finished the rest of the day in my office doing their work at my desk. As an added assignment they were instructed to write an essay on the dangers of smoking cigarettes. They reluctantly apologized and completed the assignment.

Later that week they both walked into my office and asked me why I did not suspend them. I responded to their question with a question of my own. I stated “Please give me three facts each about the dangers of smoking?” Without hesitation they provided me with three facts each. I explained “Suspension would not be beneficial for your education. Ensuring accountability for your actions that’s supportive and meaningful will.” My leadership focused on change not punishment. I reflected on why students were disruptive in the preceding year and began to understand that through punishment I would only encourage students to think of a better way to circumvent the system. On the other hand, I believed that if I used negative behavior as a teaching moment I could build trust and respect with the student. By gaining their respect they would begin to think about their actions. As the instructional leader my ultimate goal was

to empower students to think independently. Change was occurring and I was excited. However, the excitement would soon turn to gloom.

### **Unforeseen Penalties of Leadership**

One morning in February I received a memo from the Superintendent stating that the alternative high school would be facing budget cuts in 2008. I asked my Secretaries if they heard of any such budget cuts in past years. They explained to me that this happens every year and not to worry. I met with my staff and explained to them that we are going to face some hard times in the near future and we needed to be mindful of how we were spending our money. Although I knew that my veteran staff had experienced this before, I wanted to be honest so I kept the entire faculty in the loop. In late February of 2008 gas prices began to increase, there were facing a staggering number of foreclosures on homes, and CNN financial analysts were predicting a bleak economic outlook in the next three to five years. Typically I would not pay much attention to economic situation that was beginning to grip the financial neck of our nation and in particular the State of New Jersey. However, this time I paused and wondered, “Will this impact our school and what will happen if our funding gets cut?” The answers to these questions would soon have a tremendous impact on my leadership. In my journal, I verified my thoughts regarding our funding.

Just when I thought I was on my way to developing a great program funding gets in the way. I am working diligently to change the culture of this place! I never thought that money would impact my leadership vision. Teachers as well as students have grown in many ways. Culture is changing, students want information about college, trade schools, and some are working on resumes. This

may all be a memory if the funding for the school is cut. I will stay focused on what I can control and stay true to my vision for this school.

February was coming to a close and I was looking forward to better weather and news about our future.

During a sunny brisk March morning I started my day like I always do. I parked my car on the side of the school and entered the building from the side door and walked toward my office. In the morning the custodian would always play music and every morning I was always greeted with the horn of John Coltrane, the sweet voice of Billy Holiday, or the priceless sound of the Count Basie band. Everyday was like walking through a time portal in which my custodian would enrich my day, the faculty, and the lives of my students with his musical selections before school. I would pass my Business teacher who always arrives at school before the contractual time. I always tried to beat him in the door, but for the life of me I never seem to make it into school before him.

Every morning I sat at my desk, turned on my computer, and checked my email. I usually got emails from my Secretaries, the Superintendent, or from other administrators in the district. As I scrolled down the list of recent email I noticed an email from the Business Administrator. The email simply stated "See me when you get a chance". No big deal. I figured that he wanted to meet with me to discuss whether or not I needed the instructional supplies and technology software that I ordered. It was 9:30 am and the school was quiet so I strolled over to the Superintendent's office to meet with the Business Administrator, Steve. As I sat down he stated, "You're not going to like what I have to say". I was thinking, "I really do not need those supplies anyway". Steve reported that the school did not have enough money to continue to operate with its current

financial capital. He proceeded to explain to me that the school needed an additional \$425,000 dollars to stay operational. Steve further explained that I needed to complete a cost analysis to identify if we would be able to keep our doors open for the 2008-2009 school year.

I currently had \$319,000 dollars and I needed to find an additional \$106,000 to covering operating costs. As I considered where to cut money, preserving the teaching positions was a priority. The teachers did a great job and I wanted to make sure that they continued to have jobs. In my journal, I expressed my feelings regarding the lack of funding and how I tried to close the financial gap.

I see this situation as an opportunity to for me to continue to develop my leadership. My worry is that I will not be able to find the funding necessary to keep the school open. I have my staff and students depending on me to save the school. I think the most important thing to do is to develop ways to cut money. This may work given that the culture of the school is changing. I will try to develop some funding possibilities. If the staff and students are invested then we all have one primary focus which could galvanize our culture and create lasting change. Just like football, one team, one goal, one victory for all of us.

My first proposal was to give myself a 10,000 dollar pay cut and slash non-essential programming. I then began to work on the daily schedule and move from a five day week to a three day week and place all employees on a 3/5 salary so that they could keep their benefits. With these cuts, I was still \$65,000 short. I contacted local, state, and federal politicians to solicit support for our program. Local politicians supported the program and in the town of Wood Beach one of their public officials received their high school



diploma from our school. I sent an email to our local congressman and he replied he was not aware of our situation. I wrote him back and asked “Can you help us?” and I attached the current research addressing the impact that high school dropouts have on the economy. He told me that he would look in to the situation.

Later that day, the Superintendent called me over to his office to speak to me about the school and the future of the district. He told me that he tried to get the town of Wood Beach to pay for the remaining debt. He stated to me “LeRoi, there is a board meeting next week and I will ask the board to fund the program for another year because I do not want to see you go.” Despite his efforts, the next day the Superintendent called me to his office and told me that the school would be closing. He told me that I needed to share this information with my staff at the next faculty meeting. Wow! How does one prepare to share such devastating news? I felt defeated as a leader. I gave it my all every day and my reward was that the school was closing do to circumstances beyond my control.

After hearing the news for Dr. Harvey I was drained emotionally. I through I was going to build a new school with an innovative educational paradigm that parallels the work of Sergiovanni and Fullan. I could not wait for the day to be over. I waited for my staff to leave and I decided to take a different route home. It was now April and the weather was beautiful. I felt like the world was moving so fast around me and I was in slow motion. The pain was stinging and blunt as if I was punched then stabbed with little needles all over my body. I began to question myself and what I could have done better. Why me? Am I a failure? The list went on and on. I documented this stressful situation, in my in my journal.

I realized that if I was going to tell my Fiancée the news, I wanted to have a moment for myself. I decided to take a long drive and reflect on the terrible news I received. Finally I went home. As I walked in the front door I heard Diana call my name and asked me did I have a good day?.I whispered under my breath, "You don't want to know." It took me a moment but I collected my thoughts and said "Fine but I have to talk to you." She strolled downstairs with her work clothes still on and I did not waste any time and I just blurted out, "The school is closing and my staff and I will be out of a job in June!" I began telling her the story of how we do not have enough funding to continue next year and the school will close. She was very supportive of the situation.. She told me that we would get though it.

I kept thinking about the people I hired and how they wanted to be a part of my vision. It was my passion that made them commit to working in this type of environment. I needed some time before I told my staff so I emailed Dr. Harvey and asked him if I could delay telling the staff. The students and teachers were doing well and I did not want to disrupt their learning. He agreed. I waited until April to share this heartbreaking news.

I scheduled an emergency faculty meeting for April 23 at 3:15 pm in the science classroom. I waited until the entire faculty was present and then I came in with my agenda, if you want to call it an agenda. It was more like last rights. The only thing that kept running through my mind was what I was I going to do about my faculty. I walked into the meeting and said "Afternoon," and my quick witted science teacher said, "Mr. Jones you can't afford the Good?" As I looked at him he gave me a stare as if to say we have your back we know it is hard. As I began to speak my voice cracked and quivered

slightly so I tried to clear my throat. I tried again and the words began to come out of my mouth with a profound sadness. “Ladies and gentleman it is my responsibility to inform you that due to budget issues and being flat funded at the state and federal levels the Wood Beach Adult School will be having its last graduation.” I asked if anyone had any questions and they looked at me with blank faces. I walked out of the room and stepped outside to catch my breath. The room seemed stifling like I was looking for oxygen every time I inhaled. As I caught my breath I saw the teachers talking in the parking lot with sad and stressed faces.

The following week I was called into the Superintendent’s office and Dr. Harvey reported that the Wood Beach School district was in need of a Director of Pupil Personnel services. He encouraged me to apply for the job because I had the special education background that made me an ideal candidate. I replied “Thank you Dr. Harvey I will.” I felt good, only for a moment. What in the world was I going to do about the staff I hired? One question I kept asking myself was “How was I going to take a job and leave my staff out to dry?” In the business world it is survival of the fittest, however where I come from you don’t turn your back on people who believe in you, who trust you, and who value your leadership. Do I take the position that was available to me by Dr. Harvey or do I stay with my staff and stand behind them on the unemployment line. I decided to wait until after graduation before I made my decision. Ultimately, I decided not to take the job. I met with Dr. Harvey and explained to him that I would not be applying for the Directors position and I thanked him for all of his support. In my journal, I reflected upon my decisions, throughout the year as a school leader.

As I reflect on the year so far, my goal was to hire teachers that shared my vision and passion for education for many years, not one. I was successful in hiring quality teachers. My decision to not take the Director of Special Services position stems from my personal lived experiences. In my life loyalty meant something to me and my family. Supporting people that have supported me is valued immensely. I am not sure that if my decision is the right one. Maybe I will never know, but through my leadership lens it seems like the right decision for me.

As we closed out May, my staff was getting ready for graduation.

### **Final March**

It was now June and we were winding down the year. Students were studying for final exams and finishing their written assignment in order to graduate. The graduating class of June 2008 would be the last to graduate from Wood Beach. The day of graduation was inspiring and all of our students were dressed like true professionals. They came with family and friends and the smiles on their faces were truly priceless. Graduation was held in the gym of the elementary school. The crowd was loud with excitement and anticipation. As I began the graduation ceremony the crowd increased their volume to the point that I was not sure if anyone could hear me. In the crowd there was a man who screamed out “Let the Principal speak!” The gym was not completely quiet but the students could hear me call their names for awards and their diplomas. Throughout the ceremony I was fighting back tears and emotions that were tearing me apart inside. At the conclusion of the graduation I thanked the students, my staff, Dr. Harvey, the Wood Beach Board of Education, and parents for all of their support.

## **Outcomes**

As I walked out of the graduation ceremony I was greeted by parents who thanked me for not giving up on their child. Many of my students walked up to me and told me that they were in the process of applying to college, had job interviews set up, and were scheduled for interviews with various unions. For example, Kista graduated and applied to several universities. John was accepted into a union and has found employment in construction. Mike was attending classes at a local community college and was working in his community. I told them that I was proud of them and that it was only the beginning of their careers. I explained to them that if they continued to put forth the effort they demonstrated throughout the year, success would surely find them. My emotional ocean was swirling with joy, fear of the unknown, sadness, and excitement. As I drove home that evening I realized that I did make a difference and I was proud of that accomplishment. For example, one of my students wrote me a letter that I documented. The letter was her reflection of me and my leadership during my tenure at Wood Beach Alternative High School. I read the letter, while recording in my audio journal.

When we first met I was going through some really hard times in my life, problems with school, my parents, friends, and whatever else life could throw at me. One of the worst things was the school situation; I didn't think I was going to graduate. I thought I was going to spend another miserable year at Henry Hudson, and then my guidance counselor told me about your school. I didn't think it was the right choice to make and I thought my parents would be ashamed of me if I even thought of going to your school, When we came to check everything out it was just like a normal school and what made it even better was

you. You taught me a few things that I'll always remember. One of the biggest things was understanding how much my parents care about me. I finally realized their so strict because they love me, not because their mean and I also shouldn't be going out to clubs when I'm this young, and if I want something bad enough I can get it through hard work. When I was kicked out of my house for breaking curfew and you told me to go home and apologize, I did, yeah it took awhile to talk to my parents but once I did they wanted me back home. Who knows were I would be if I didn't listen to you. If I never came to Wood Beach I don't know if my life would be as good as it is now. So thank you for everything, even though at times you thought I was taking this opportunity for granted, I'm grateful that you were the principal. Thank you so much for everything.

### **Conclusion**

Through this autoethnographic analysis I observed my own transformation as I developed my leadership style in which to foster change. I believed in my students and by the end of the school year they were confident in their educational goals. They were filling out applications to postsecondary educational institutions, applying to trade schools, and interviewing with military recruiters. The struggles my students faced were extraordinary such as drug abuse, abandonment, and physical and sexual abuse. As a staff, we were humbled by their determination. My students have dealt with countless educational obstacles throughout their educational career. I was proud of each and every one of my students who though great adversity and our educational approach were able to find some sense of stability while at Wood Beach.

My students embraced the value of education and demonstrated tremendous effort that was praiseworthy of a high school diploma. Success was a construct that I thought could not be measured until I called the names of my graduates during our graduation ceremony. Writing about myself gave me the opportunity to document my experiences within the context of an autoethnographic approach that allowed me to observe myself as a leader in an effort to promote change. I saw how sheer joy, excitement, and relief impacted my students and an overwhelming sense of pride that only happens when the road is paved with determination and success. I took the opportunity to reflect on the year and how I was received by my faculty and how I observed and monitored their performance throughout the year. I walked away from my experience at Wood Beach with optimism and excitement as I moved into my new leadership position. My students received a quality education and were impacted by caring faculty and staff. I was proud to be a part of that change. The change that I experienced was intrinsic and permeated outward to my staff and students. Through an autoethnographic trifocal I was able to understand my leadership.

The students at Wood Beach profoundly impacted my perspective on education and leadership. Reflective practice provided me with the ability to think about the students as individuals and identify strategies to meet their individual needs. I have learned that students will respond if they feel safe, cared for in a healthy environment, and emotionally supported. Reflective practice is fundamentally structured around inquiry. We tend to recognize the importance of allocating time for reflection when we can see it as a means for gaining visibility on a problem or question (Raelin, 2002). Through reflection I was able to generate a leadership method that would be the

foundation for my vision at Wood Beach. Organizational cultures often nurture the creation of instructional leader's approach. Leaders often create an organizational culture from a preconceived cultural scheme of shared values and assumptions guided and restricted by personal beliefs (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

My staff decided to work at Beach Wood because they believed in the mission to provide quality education for the non-traditional student. I was able to demonstrate my leadership and model the organizational principles that built the credibility of organizational values and aims by demonstration, not articulation (Senge, 1999). My staff trusted and believed in me, which further stimulated proactive and creative teaching styles that positively impacted student achievement. My teachers at Wood Beach were competent practitioners of education and every day they wanted to make a difference in the lives of the students they taught. They looked to provide supportive discipline to students who were not focused on their education. I had a clear vision for Wood Beach and used the process of reflection as a guide to evaluate my leadership. Next, I explored the experiences that have impacted and shaped my leadership as a principal at Mountain View Alternative High School.



## **Chapter VI**

### **Mountain View Alternative High School**

#### **Introduction**

The principal's style of leadership is based on his or her assumptions about human beings, human learning, and human nature. These assumptions, conscious or unconscious, are the foundation for decision making and choosing a leadership style (Bayat, 1998). While the value of administration in supporting and creating quality schools may seem obvious, scholars have only begun to examine the impact of educational leadership. Studies on the topic suggest that in the past, principals were able to succeed, at least partially, by simply carrying out the directives of central administrators (Perez et al. 1999). The traditional managing style of principals is no longer adequate to meet today's educational challenges. School leaders must assume a greater leadership role that encompasses a collaborative approach focused on student performance. While managers rely on the authority given to them from above, (Buhler 1995) effective leaders seek to create a cooperative culture in which everyone has a responsibility to lead and to suggest changes when necessary (Drake 1999; Perez et al. 1999). Shared responsibility offers collective outcomes that are equally distributed throughout the school.

The success of administrators is a direct result of the specific leadership strategies utilized in an educational setting. An administrator's leadership style influences the effectiveness and efficacy of the organization and is the function of several inter-related factors (Fullan, 2007) Infusing all stakeholders in the process of ensuring student

achievement is a fundamental strategy that offers multiple perspectives and can provide insight into best practices. The methods and leadership approach, that school administrators utilize to effectively run a school ultimately serves as a foundation for the atmosphere and culture of the building.

School culture, is defined as “the basic assumptions, norms and values, and cultural artifacts that are shared by school members, which influence their functioning at school” (Maslowski, 2001, pp. 8-9). Culture plays a significant role in enhancing or impeding school effectiveness (Heck and Marcoulides, 1996; Sammons et al., 1995). Administrators who demonstrate a strong sense of commitment combined with high performance distinguish schools with a healthy organizational culture and staff wellbeing (Sergiovanni, 2006). In an implicit sense, school culture manifests itself in rituals, customs, stories, ways of treating each other, and culture’s artifacts such as language (Stoll, 1999). It is, in other words, a system of meaning that influences how people think and act at school. It is clear that school culture is a multifaceted concept, composed of different dimensions (Maslowski, 2001; Staessens, 1990). In order to better comprehend my experiences as the Principal at Mountain View Alternative High School (Mountain View), an autoethnographic compass was needed to chart the critical moments and defining situations of my leadership.

As I entered this new leadership position I was aware of the challenges the alternative student population would pose given they had not experienced academic success in other settings. For example, the student discipline issues that I had to address on a daily basis were extraordinary. I was consistently challenged by students who would not follow basic direction like “Go to class” and those that wanted to play all day and

neglect their school work. I found my self addressing six to eight discipline issues before homeroom. During my tenure at Mountain View, I experienced the bureaucracy of underhanded politics, which helped to focus my approach to lead from an ethical perspective. The teaching staff was numb and apathetic from their past experiences working with the student population. It seemed like nothing unearthed them. I asked Mr. Thomas, the school Custodian, about the gritty attitude that the staff possessed. He told me that most of the staff has experienced everything from students being beat unconscious to death threats. The students were not motivated to be in this academic setting. At the end of one particular day I was sitting in my office and thinking about ways to encourage teachers to build relationships with students. I was not sure that the staff would support new ideas because they were struggling to manage their classrooms, build basic rapport with students, or inspire them to learn. As my bag lay slumped over my shoulder I remembered what Mr. Curtis, the Assistant Superintendent, said to me a few days after my first faculty meeting. He stated, “LeRoi it is important to lead from behind.” As I reflected on his statement I had no idea what he was talking about. I did not think that Nelson Mandela would have wanted me to lead from behind when all of my students were behind in reading, math and basic writing skills. He quoted a famous social justice leader from South Africa and in my opinion he could not have given me worse advice.

### **The Transformational Quest**

**Cultural context.** As I closed out the year at Wood Beach and continued my autoethnographic analysis in administration, I was offered the Principal position at Mountain View which was significantly different from Wood Beach in terms of staff

size, district structure, and school culture. As I began the 2008-2009 school year as the Principal of Mountain View, I learned that the supportive and encouraging environment that I thrived in was gone and was been replaced with a rigid structure that did not deviate from policy or procedure nor consider the lived experiences of students. My new supervisor was only available to educate me about policies and to correct my mistakes

### **Mountain View Alternative High School**

Mountain View had a unique educational focus. The primary function of the school was to provide a quality education for special education students seeking to gain expertise in a particular vocation. All of the students who attended Mountain View were classified and had an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The students were referred by the Child Study Team (CST) within their sending districts. For example, if a student is disruptive in class, not meeting his or her educational requirements, behind in credits, or not conforming to the traditional educational environment, the CST will explore alternative education settings. The goal is to place a student in the least restrictive educational environment that will meet their educational and social needs.

At Mountain View, the student population was ninety percent male and ten percent female. The students came from different high schools throughout nearby counties. Mountain View was reportedly committed to respecting the rights and feelings of all students. To this end, it was further reported that the administration, faculty, and support staff believed in active participation and involvement of students in developing a stimulating and enriching high school experience. Mountain View educated students with an array of learning disabilities that challenged the faculty to provide authentic instruction that was specific to individual learning styles. It was hoped that a highly

individualized curriculum coupled with updated educational resources would help to prepare students for life after high school. The veteran teachers and support staff described the climate of the school as an atmosphere conducive to educational achievement. It was important to highlight the demographics to understand culture. For example, many of our teachers are veterans and have been in the district for many years. I wanted to determine if their experience contributed to the culture and organizational dynamics of the school.

### **Staff Demographics**

The staff at Mountain View was composed of fourteen Teachers, two Secretaries, a Substance Abuse Counselor, Guidance Counselor, Nurse, three Custodians and a Discipline Supervisor. The demographics were unique in terms of gender, age and race. The instructional staff was comprised of eight female teachers, 57% of the faculty, and six male teachers. The average age of the male instructional staff was 55.3 and the average age of the female instructional staff was 47.3 years of age. My non-instructional staff was identified as faculty that does not provide academic instruction to students. In the main office there were two female Secretaries that had been at the school for fifteen years. Both Secretaries were eligible for retirement with a mean age of 62. My Substance Abuse Counselor (SAC) was a female who had been in the district for twelve years and was 52 years old. The Guidance Counselor was a 54 year old female who I hired at the start of the school year. We had a part-time Nurse who was 54 years old female and had been in the district for 10 years. I had three male Custodians with an average age of 56. The Discipline Supervisor was 57 years old and worked directly with me to address the daily discipline issues that arose during the day. Ninety percent of the staff was

predominantly White, with the remaining 10% identified as African American including the Custodian and me.

### **Student Demographics**

The student demographic was quite different from the staff in terms of gender, race and age. We had 48 male students and 5 female students. The male students composed 90% of the population. Forty one percent, or 22, of the students were Black American and 27, or 50%, of students were White. Less than one percent of the school population was Latino. The total number of Latino students in the school was 4. The age of the students ranged from fourteen to eighteen years with a mean age of 16.5 years.

The demographics of the faculty and students generated a reflective question. I thought to myself “there is not a person of color in direct contact with the students.” That concerned me. In an effort to understand the organizational dynamics of the school I used the organizational model of Bolman and Deal (2003).

### **Structural Frame**

The organizational configuration at Mountain View was grounded in a top down structure. Bolman and Deal (2003) assert that the right formal arrangement minimizes problems and maximizes performance. The structure in Mountain View was not conducive to creative thinking. Ideas that represented a deviation from the district policy were frowned upon. In the hierarchy of the district revealed a descending flow of power and control. The Mountain View school district administrative team consisted of a Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Business Administrator and an Assistant Business Administrator. The building responsibilities and personnel issues were addressed by the superintendent and Assistant Superintendent. Business issues including

approving purchase orders, instructional materials, non-instructional salaries, and benefits were the responsibility of the Business Administrator and Assistant Business Administrator. The Assistant Superintendent disseminated important district information to the building Principal by emails, memos, or letters. In turn, the building Principal was responsible for disseminating this information to their respect building staff. As such, I was responsible for all personnel and provided them with information when it was sent to me from central administration. All personnel reported directly to me for their individual needs in order to meet the educational demand of the students.

### **Human Resource Frame**

Trying to increase flexibility and employee skills simultaneously creates an increasingly vexing human resource dilemma (Bolman & Deal, 2003). My leadership was met with challenges when I attempted to introduce change into the culture of Mountain View. Very few of my faculty embraced the changes I sought to implement and they made every effort to challenge me with issues such as classroom coverage, building initiatives, and working in innovative ways with struggling students. I wanted to support staff and encourage them to grow, however they were very reluctant. Many of my teachers were set in their ways in terms of instructional practices and classroom management. For example, a student Carl was finished with his work and wanted to read a book that he found to be particularly interesting. The teacher did not allow the student to read the book which resulted in the student becoming agitated and angry. The teacher sent the angry student to me to manage. After listening to the student and corroborating his story with the Teacher, I asked the teacher why she did not allow Carl the opportunity to read a required novel that would only enrich his education. Her response was “We only

had five minutes left in the class and I did not want him to disrupt the other students.”

The behavior of the teacher made me reflect on McGregor’s (1960) Theory X management style which he explains that Theory X was the only way to get anything done because workers are never satisfied. For the rest of that week Carl sat in my office after he completed his work and read his book. That Friday I asked how he liked the book he said “It kind of reminds me of my life.” I began to peel back the layers of the faculty and began to realize that some of my staff was not willing to change.

According to Deal and Peterson (1999), in toxic schools the elements of culture reinforce negative behavior, the cultural network works in opposition to anything positive, and rituals and traditions are phony and counterproductive. I found observed and experienced this phenomena at Mountain View. For example, I overheard my Secretaries speaking to parents and students in an unprofessional manner which negatively impacted the attitude, perception and experience of the students and their families. In an effort to change this style of interaction, I made it clear to the Secretaries that this was an institution of learning and they needed to act like professionals. On another occasion a student was being disruptive and I removed him from class. As I walked him into my office my Secretary said “He is not going to make it here”, without any knowledge of the situation. The student fired back at the secretary “Fuck you old bitch” and I had to suspend the student for his language. These are just a few examples of the negative culture within the building that can have a profound and serious impact on every aspect of the program. As I reflected on my experience from Wood Beach it is clear to me that I was in a building that was significantly different. I was acutely aware that I would have a difficult time trying to encourage my staff to try different strategies that would promote



student success. I was optimistic and hopeful that my staff would value children the same way that I embrace student growth. The faculty had been working together for over ten years and established a way of working that, in some cases, was counterproductive for student growth. In order to begin to understand my staff and their philosophy regarding education I began to take a closer look at the impact of age, race, and gender on the culture of the school.

### **Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame highlights the tribal aspect of contemporary organizations. It centers on complexity and ambiguity in organizational phenomena and on the many uses of symbols to mediate the meaning of organizational events and activities (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The school looked like any other school from the outside with fresh cut grass, groomed bushes, and neat flower beds. On the inside the school looked like a correctional institution with cinderblock walls and off-white paint. The library was not used for learning but rather for storage. My first goal was to focus on cleaning out the library and making it a place for students. I found a donated couch and placed it in the library so that students would have a place to sit comfortably while reading. I purchased pieces of art work and hung them on the walls to give the room an inviting feel. I thought that change would allow teachers the opportunity to use the space for academic instruction. The school had display cases that I used to highlight student achievements and important information about college fairs and jobs. The response to my symbolic changes were very different from my experience at Wood Beach. The politics of the school provided a transactional behavior of routine that has been embedded in the culture.

## **Political Frame**

The political arena at Mountain View was much different than that of Wood Beach in that I was not the only person interpreting, sending and receiving information from the central office. I was in a position which allowed me to do my job, however I could feel the invisible thumb screw pressing down upon my shoulders. Bolman and Deal (2003) assert that the political frame views authority as only one among many forms of power. My position as the instructional leader within the political oven of Mountain View was emotionally and professionally stressful. The treatment of the students by certain teachers was concerning because they would use their political alliances to influence the central office regarding my leadership, how the central office received and interpreted the information given to them by certain members of my staff, and how the central office responded to the information. Bolman and Deal (2003) assert that cultural conflict occurs between groups with different values, traditions, beliefs and lifestyles.

I was able to call a principal from another building if I had any questions or if I needed clarification on the policies and procedures of the district. I perceived this as a tremendous problem because the administrator that I was encouraged to communicate with was the founding principal of the program where I was currently employed who had created a toxic culture. He hired my entire staff and from the little conversations I had with my teachers he still kept in touch with them, informally asserting his power. This posed a unique problem for me because I did not know who was responsible for the informal line of communication that existed between my staff and formal Principal. The question I asked myself was “Why would the founding Principal that hired the entire staff move to another building within the district?”

The current Superintendent was retiring at the end of the year and the Assistant Superintendent was scheduled to be assuming the Superintendent position. The Assistant Superintendent seemed to have an interesting career that had placed him at the helm. I learned from thumbing through past year books and old district memos and fliers that the Assistant Superintendent was formally an Assistant Principal for many years in the district and then became a founding Principal of a Health Academy within the district. He then ascended to the position of Assistant Superintendent, which was perplexing within the context of the organizational structure. There were other administrators in the district that have been in the district longer than the current Assistant Superintendent, however they never moved up the political ladder. The first question I pondered was “Did the other administrators not want the job of Assistant Superintendent?” I next wondered if there was some type of internal political situation and alliances that ultimately lead to him securing the position of Assistant Superintendent.

As the new administrator I became acutely aware that everyone in our administrative meetings knew each other and may have been connected outside of work. Another obvious fact was that I was the only administrator of color in the district. I did not feel welcome and I rarely got a chance to connect with other administrators about the culture of the district. I felt like the odd man out and was not fully embraced by central office. As I developed a deeper understanding of the political structure of the district, I began to question if the school was a good fit for my leadership style.

It was critical in my research to explore the organizational frames of both educational settings where I worked and the different demographics that made up the faculty and students populations. By focusing on the culture and climate of Wood Beach

comparatively with Mountain View, I developed further insight into my leadership style. Who I am as a person directly impacts my approach to situations that occurred during my analysis. My cultural identity and life experiences directly impacted my espousal of transactional, transformational, servant, and social justice leadership. However, leading through those paradigms clearly had implications when the context, demographic of the staff and culture of the school district changes. This autoethnographic study provided a broader view of how my leadership was impacted by race, culture, class, gender, organizational defenses, and personal values.

### **Vision**

My vision remained consistent when I left Wood Beach and entered the Mountain View school district. Although the environment was different, the population that I served was still the marginalized alternative student. I wanted to provide the best program that would prepare students to effectively compete in twenty-first century society. The goal was to maintain a student centered program that focused on promoting self-esteem and academic achievement by identifying quality teachers that shared my philosophy. I was focused on providing an environment in which teachers developed positive relationships with students. My objective was for teachers to care about their responsibilities as educators, thus providing the environment for cognitive exchange that fostered intrinsic student motivation. It was important to maximize meaningful teacher student interactions by supporting and encouraging staff to be creative and promote learning through an ethic of care. My vision focused on changing the culture of the school. I had a veteran staff and creating change was a challenging task. I believed that

our students deserved a quality education so I was willing to embrace the daunting task of persevering through the struggles associated with being a change agent.

I was hired three weeks before the school year was scheduled to begin. During this time I had to meet the staff and become acclimated to my new facility. The school building felt like a prison as evidenced by white walls, cinderblock hallways, metal and wired glass doors, and loud bells to signal the beginning and end of a period. During my second week, I began thinking of ways to implement change. Over the weekend I was writing in my journal about how to change the environment and decided to focus my efforts on the school library. Given that it was being used as a storage area and there was a minimal amount of staff connection to the space, it seemed like an ideal place to start.

### **Starting a New Culture**

At the beginning of the school year I decided that I wanted to make the library the focal point for teachers and students to participate in research, study, or to have class in a different setting within the school. The library was used as a storage facility not a place for learning. To make this room more inviting I found a couch and thought it would be a good idea to create an environment that was student centered and conducive to learning. I brought the couch into the media center with the help of custodians and began removing old items that could be stored in other locations throughout the school. I then used my own money to buy some pictures that reflected a more collegial environment for students. I then had signs made that labeled the subject areas of the school. For example, in one area of the library there was a significant amount of books for science so I labeled that area Science. In a different part of the library there were a lot of math books so I labeled that area “The Math Corner.” I did the same for the rest of the core subject areas such as

English and History so that students could quickly access educational resources for projects and research. Deal and Peterson (1999) explain that leaders, both formal and informal, convey important messages and meanings in their words, actions, and nonverbal announcements. As I finished out the week I was looking forward to the weekend.

Over the weekend I could not sleep and my stomach felt like I had a big pit inside that would not go away. I had no one to bounce ideas off of and I felt alone. I would look at myself in the mirror and question my leadership. I knew that if I was doing positive things for students I could not go wrong so I stayed the course and kept my focus on the students. I reflected on this stressful interaction, that transpired that day in my journal.

During fourth period I saw the Math Teacher using the library and it made me feel like I finally did something right! At the end of the day I received a phone call from Mr. Curtis, the Assistant Superintendent, requesting that we meet at his office. As I drove to central office to meet with him sweat formed on my forehead and I began to worry that I did something wrong. When I entered his office he wasted no time in asking me if I put a couch in the media center. I told him that I did because the space was not being used and I thought it would be a good idea to create an atmosphere that promoted a caring and supportive environment. He asked me if I was authorized to do that. I told him that I did not ask. He then launched into a series of questions regarding my decision pertaining to safety, the use of the custodians and potential law suits that could be filed for bringing a couch into the school. After he explained why it was not a good idea I told him that I was only trying to develop an environment that was positive. The students

did not use the library before I did anything to it. He responded by telling me that he is hearing something different. Wow! I have a lot to learn about this organization. Maybe they do not value my leadership style.

At that point I was clear that I was not the first person to get information in my building. Someone on my faculty was providing information to Mr. Curtis regarding my leadership and the decisions I was making. I felt like I could not do anything right and did not sleep that night.

I decided to call my old Superintendent, Mr. Harvey, who was a great mentor to me. I explained my situation and asked him to provide me with some advice. I later documented our conversation and my feelings in my journal.

He said not to worry about it, and continue doing the right thing by students. He told me to make sure that all my decisions were student-centered. I am in my second year of administration and I anticipate that I would make some mistakes, but I feel like I am not wanted regardless of what I do for students. I will try to shake it off and continue to focus on creating a new positive culture in the building.

### **Leadership Unfolds**

It was November 13, 2008 and every morning since school began I would try to meet with students to find out how they were feeling and reduce the potential for serious conflicts in the building. From 7:45 am to 8:00 am, my staff and I monitored student behavior and addressed any issues such as rumors swirling or students who seemed agitated. Together we made sure that students were safe, ate their breakfast, and got to class on time. The morning duty is the hub for student gossip. When the breakfast area

was still, quiet, and flat the staff and I had a heightened awareness that something could go wrong. To further reduce negative behavior I met every student as soon as they entered the building with a “good morning how are you” and I asked them about their previous night. Some say “fine” others say “okay”, but the ones that said nothing and had a blank look on their face grabbed my attention. I tried to meet with them while they were eating. However, I never sat at a table next to a student with out first asking their permission. By asking permission to sit down at the same table the student feels in control and less anxious. However, there are times were I misread a student’s intentions. For example, one morning a female student walked in to the building from the bus and when I said “Good morning Fay” she did not reply. At her breakfast table three other girls were sitting around the table and Amy was talking about Fay and stated, “she called me last night but I had another call, she wasn’t that important”. Fay looked down and grabbed her purse unzipped the bag and pulled out a box cutter and stated to Amy “I hate you” and lunged toward Amy. A teacher, Mrs. Mellow, jumped out of her seat, wedged herself between Fay and Amy and asked for the knife. Fay said “No, I hate that bitch if I get to her I am gonna kill her.” At that point Mrs. Mellow was face to face with Fay and as I moved toward Fay my History Teacher, Mrs. Morrow, grabbed Fay from the waist and pulled her toward her side. I grabbed the hand with the box cutter and asked for the weapon. The student reluctantly released the weapon to me and the two teachers deescalated Fay. They told her to take deep breaths and moved her to a nearby office with Mrs. Morrow so that she did not have students antagonizing her.



As I reflected on the situation I realized that this issue could have been avoided if teachers were building positive relationships with students. I documented my feelings and thoughts, regarding this unfortunate situation in my audio journal.

Fay could have killed someone. This is not the way a school should operate and teachers seem unshaken by Fay's actions. How can teachers be so emotionless about a student aggressively attacking another student? This is not supposed to happen in a place that should be a safe and healthy environment. I will try to build rapport with the teachers and develop a collaborative approach in developing safe healthy culture.

According to Sergiovanni (1994) the success of any school is facilitated by caring teachers that have direct contact with the students. This situation further reminded me that I had a lot of work to do if I was going to maintain some type of order in the building. The student was suspended and eventually removed from the school. I spoke to her case manager and recommended that Fay go to a school with resources to address her anger issues. She agreed and thanked me for the phone call. I believe that Mountain View was unable to meet Fay's educational needs. Prior to that incident she did not have any discipline referrals. She was a good student and attended school regularly. Based on her explosive behavior a more therapeutic environment would be more appropriate. At the end of the day I sent a memo to the teachers that were involved in the altercation formally thanking them for their support.

## **Social Injustice**

**Injustice cloaked in policy.** The year 2008 marked the beginning of a new era. The United States elected its first Black president when we elected Barack Obama to lead this great nation. January 20<sup>th</sup>, the day of his inauguration I wore a suit and sent out a memo days before that we would be watching the presidential inauguration in the library. The students and staff knew why I wore a suit and why my chest was broad. I was an African American administrator celebrating change while I struggled to change the culture in the school. I was proud to be Black and a leader of young people. However I am not sure that all of my staff shared my enthusiasm. As I dismissed the students from the assembly I scanned the faces of the teachers who did not appear excited and did not use this historical opportunity as a teaching moment. The next day they ignored this great historical moment.

I was getting the feeling that my color played a significant role how many of the staff interacted with me. The isolation, lack of cultural understanding by the Teachers, and disengaged attitudes was overt. I could never prove that color was a factor in my experience. However I could not discount the fact that many of my staff did not have a wealth of experience or interest in diversity issues. To tell you the truth, I don't think the teachers thought beyond their drive to tolerate the school day. As a person of color, there are certain behaviors that are noticeable which cannot be seen by the naked eye. For example, being the only staff of color I felt a sense of pride that our students witnessed such an historic moment in our countries less than stellar history. I could not share that experience with my staff. I asked a few of my teachers what they thought about that historical moment and their response to me was "Obama almost lost" or "I'm not sure he

is ready to run our country.” They had no understanding of the impact it had on our students of color. There was no discussion the rest of the week about the results of the most historic elections in American history. I did not see an essay written about the elections and when I would ask teachers if they are going to weave this monumental event into their lesson plans many stated, “They don’t care about politics.” Others asked “Why?” They were only interested in “getting out of here” which meant getting our students to graduation. That evening, I wrote about my feelings regarding the behavior of my teachers.

I am not sure but society is changing and I think that students want to know more about the first Black president. Teachers are so concerned about getting the students out of the building that many did not say anything about the events that happened today. I am so mad! These teachers act like prophets; they think that they know who will not make it in life and who has a fighting chance, based on their past experiences with this population. Don’t they know if they change, the culture will change! These teachers are not concerned about our students. I am!

The next day life resumed as normal with a teacher, Mrs. Titch, walking into my office and announcing that her student, Quadeer, did not need to be in her class because he wasn’t following directions. I asked her what she did to address the situation and she reported that she would not tolerate a student wanting to write about the negative behaviors he was involved in over the last few days. She went on to say “I do not have time for that Ghetto behavior.” Mrs. Titch’s statement was not overtly discriminatory. However, during my time as the school administrator she never referred to the behavior of our white students as “ghetto”. At that point I stopped the meeting and told her to leave

my office. I had Quadeer paged over the intercom. He walked into my office and told me that Mrs. Titch was a racist. As the principal I redirected the student and explained to him that his statement was a strong accusation. He replied, “That woman does not care about me.” I replied, “Well that is different then you calling her a racist. Can you prove it?” He smirked and said, “Come on Mr. Jones I see and hear what these teachers say about you, they go behind your back and try to get the students to make you look like you don’t know what you are doing. We don’t because we know that your respect us and want the best for us. Why are you sticking up for these deceitful teachers?” I did not respond. It was clear to me that the staff at Mountain View championed individualism, mediocrity, and believed students from our alternative community can not learn (Deal & Peterson, 1999). I asked Quadeer to remain in my office and to complete the writing he started in Mrs. Titch’s class about his life experiences. I then found him a binder to store his finished work. This was a good opportunity to encourage a student to engage in a healthy form of self expression by writing about his stressful life situation and to build a relationship that would further strengthen my leverage with the student body.

After dismissal Mrs. Titch knocked on my door with her union representative and asked if we could talk. I said “Fine what do you need?” She replied “Ms. Plast and I wanted to talk to you about your comment today.” I said “What comment?” Mrs. Titch said “Mr. Jones you seemed aggressive earlier today and I felt uncomfortable.” At this point I was so angry that she would attempt to sabotage my leadership in such an unprofessional manner. I was very sarcastic with my response. I said angrily “Mrs. Titch do you feel safe with Ms. Plast in the office? She replied “Yes.” I uttered in a sarcastic monotone voice “Good, so are you going to grieve this because if you are then I will take

this as far as humanly possible! I know what is going on here and I think that you have to do what you have to do.” At that point the tone of the conversation changed from an attack on me to them backpedaling. They began to try to have a civil conversation with me. I stopped the conversation and asked them if they had anything else, and they said they were finished. I said in a monotone voice “Please leave my office.”

As they left my office I felt better! I was so mad at the fact they felt uncomfortable. In present day America, the straightforward in your face racism is cloaked under a new veil called policy. As I sit in a reflective trance I knew exactly what transpired in my office and could not do a thing about it. I knew that she was wearing an invisible mask disguising racism. It is easier to attack a person’s integrity through policy than to admit to their own issues related to racism and prejudice. Not only was I getting pressure from the Assistant Superintendent, I was placed in a political prison which was paralyzing my leadership. On one hand, I knew that it was not my tone but my color she did not like. On the other hand I could not prove it and she knew it. As I said good night to the Custodians I thought to myself that I must try hard to limit my mistakes and maximize relationships with students to make it through the year.

### **Leadership Under Scrutiny**

Mr. Curtis stopped by to meet with me regarding my leadership and he gave me an idea to get some feedback from the staff. He encouraged me to develop an open ended survey and send it out to my staff to get their thoughts on my leadership style. He was clear on his suggestion and made it a point to say that it was my choice if I wanted to solicit feedback from the staff. As a new administrator, this recommendation felt like a directive from the Assistant Superintendent that I had to follow. He told me that I should

hand out the surveys at the end of the day and have one teacher collect them for me. I developed a brief self report survey that included questions such as “How can I improve as a leader and what am I doing well?” Bolman and Deal (2006) assert that an organizational scan prevents against ignorance. For that reason, I was glad to have the opportunity to survey staff like Mrs. Titch who was aligned with Mr. Curtis. I knew that Mr. Curtis had a relationship with Mrs. Titch from their interactions at our first faculty meeting. They looked comfortable talking to one another. After I distributed the surveys, I asked Mrs. Titch to collect and return the completed surveys to me as soon as possible. I chose her because I had a hunch that she was providing false information to Mr. Curtis. The Assistant Superintendent encouraged me to have the responses typed so that I would not be able to recognize the hand writing. To test my hypothesis about Mrs. Titch and the Assistant Superintendent I purposely did not direct Mrs. Titch to type the surveys.

The next morning, I asked Mrs. Titch if she collected all of the surveys and she said no. Later that morning one of my trusted teachers revealed to me that the original surveys that I asked staff to complete were being typed. I did not ask Mrs. Titch to type the surveys and I confronted her regarding the situation. I then called the Assistant Superintendent regarding the situation and he seemed unsure of himself and fumbled over his words. I stated to him that I wanted to fact find as to why Mrs. Titch took it upon herself to type the surveys. Mr. Curtis told me that he would call me back regarding this situation. Within twenty minutes he called back and told me not to question Mrs. Titch about her actions.

The whole set of circumstances seemed suspicious. It seemed as if Mr. Curtis wanted to see the survey information and that he directed Mrs. Titch to type the surveys.

However, I was not sure until I confronted her. I walked over to her while she was leaving the faculty room and informed her that we need to meet. Her reply was “Do I need to call Mr. Curtis in on this?” After she made that statement she confirmed my suspicions. I did not know how much involvement Mr. Curtis had in this situation, but it was clear that he did not want me at Mountain View. I felt angry, relieved, and glad at the same time. In my mind, I vowed to never be a part of a district that did not value students. I was fed up with this political nonsense. Although I developed a deeper understanding of the culture at Mountain View, many of my attempts to change the culture was nullified impacting lasting change (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

I left that day feeling dejected, alone, unsure about my ability to lead and my professional future. I did not sleep, I lost twenty five pounds, and at times I could feel my heart pounding through my shirt. I reflected upon my emotions and thoughts, regarding Mr. Curtis in my personal journal.

I do not know what is going on and I think that this is unfair. Why is this happening to me? I can lead if I had some support. I would never treat another person this way. He made me feel like I did not know what I was doing. I could be an effective leader if I were supported. What do I do? I know that I am not wanted here so I need to work on ways to support students. Students are what education is all about and this guy uses politics to play with the future of young marginalized teenagers. He treats this school like a business and I treat it like an institution of opportunity for students to find their path in life. I do not like this guy and I need to think about my family. I really want to tell him what is on my

mind. Not only is he questioning my leadership he is trying to attack my integrity.

I feel like he is wrongfully trying to create an image of me that is not true.

I felt trapped in the job coupled with my personal stressors including having a newborn at home, buying a new house, and moving. I felt that I was clinging on to a fleeting hope that my life would get better. At that time, I realized that the culture of the school was out of my reach to change and I had to restructure my focus just to get through the year. The teachers did not want to change and I was on my own to make it to June. As I sat in my daughter's bedroom I realized that I had to find a way to finish the year on a positive note regardless of the circumstances. In college, when we were losing, I never played like a loser. I always tried to win and I still believe in that philosophy today. My epiphany came with great sadness however because the stakes were higher because the futures of my students rested with me and my ability to create an environment that was conducive to student success. I thought it would be a good idea to get the staff excited about growing as a professional community. My decision to attempt to develop staff consistency went terribly wrong!

### **Honeymoon Over**

To develop some staff cohesion I sent out a memo inviting staff to participate in a club that would allow them to meet outside of work for an earlier dinner after a hard day. The idea was simple, staff would donate one dollar a week and at the end of the month the entire staff would use the money or donate the funds. I thought the idea would yield some staff feedback and it did! Later that week, I received a call from Mr. Curtis and asked to see me before I left for the day. When I arrived at his office I sat down and he asked me a weird but scary question. He asked "LeRoi did you send out a memo that



promotes gambling?” I said “No,” and as the word rolled out of my mouth he slides a copy of the memo across his desk and asked “Is this your memo?” I said “Yes my name is at the top.” He continued by saying that gambling is illegal and I interrupted him and with conviction and stated “I was not trying to gamble, I know that is against the law! I was trying to promote staff cohesion within the school - that’s all!”

After I left his office I was faced with a real life challenge. I was again reminded that I was not wanted in this district and my staff was circumventing information directly to Mr. Curtis. I documented my personal feelings in my journal.

For the first time in my life I was faced with the reality that my hard work would not help in this situation. I think what this man is doing to me is wrong. I know in any other circumstance I would not have allowed him to treat me this way. I am having an “aha!” moment because in any other situation I would have behaved in a manner that is not conducive to leadership and realized that I found out that I needed to polish my leadership skills to match Mr. Curtis’s sabotaging behavior of my leadership ability. I will focus on maneuvering politically for the remainder of this year and in future leadership positions. I will work on my weaknesses!

I had just bought a house and had a newborn baby so I made the decision to try and change his mind about me as a leader. I was dazed when I left his office and was thinking that I must have missed the course in college regarding public school political bullying.

As a new administrator I was just trying to do my best and make a difference in education. I learned that being new in an organization can be dangerous politically. There were relationships that I was not aware of and communication going on that did not involve me. Driving home I was reflecting on what made my experience at Wood Beach

so positive and the “Aha!” moment darted through my mind. I realized that hiring my own people and developing sustainable relationships over a period of time can yield positive organizational results. I did not have that at Mountain View and I knew that it would get worse before it would be better. A major problem was the lack of consistency in the discipline of students. Teachers would send students to my office as opposed to managing behavior in their classroom when they were having a bad day. This type of message only exacerbates negative student behavior.

In an effort to develop rapport with the teachers at Mountain View I sent out a memo to ask if teachers if they would be willing to develop peer groups with their students in an effort to address the high number of disciplinary referrals. The teachers overall agreed to participate in the endeavor and requested training on peer groups. I followed up with literature on peer groups and then facilitated a professional development workshop for the staff. I evenly divided up the students and placed them in groups with a teacher. Each teacher was responsible for 7 students. The groups were to meet once a month in the afternoons. The duration of the group was 30 minutes. I did not want the students and teachers to become overwhelmed so I created a schedule that allowed students to attend their academic classes prior to meeting in their peer groups. As an added bonus I provided each group with donuts. I wanted to let the staff know that they were supported and that I would work with them on this valuable school wide initiative. After the first meeting, the teachers decided that they did not want to implement the peer group initiative and utilized their contract as leverage to end the initiative.

## **Lack of Consistency**

As I further scanned the organization I quickly learned that although teachers had some positive interactions with students the behavior of the teachers were not consistent. For example, Mrs. Morrow was teaching a lesson and asked a student named Brian to pick up his head and the student refused so she called for me to come into her class and remove the student. The student heard me enter the classroom and he hopped up out of his seat and said “She lets me put my head down any other day why is she bothering me?” After talking to a few students it was reported that the teacher lets Brian put his head down everyday. When I confronted her about her classroom management she said “That is a lie and I never said that he could put his head down.” I explained to her that I do not want any student to have his head down in class and if they do please notify the Nurse to evaluate them.” I reflected upon my reaction to this situation in my journal.

To me it is clear that the teacher did not tell the truth. I do not understand why people behave in this manner. I guess I expected something more from educators. Mrs. Morrow’s behavior tells me that she will not change unless forced too. If they do not think our students are valuable enough to change then what are they doing in education? More importantly what are they doing teaching this population.

The next day the Nurse was called approximately ten times to several different classrooms to check students for drug use. In many cases the students were just dealing with home stress and were tired from the night before. I decided to meet with the school counselor to develop a procedure that would support the students. We agreed that if students were not feeling well and having problems at home they could see Mrs. Long.

That worked out well because the teachers liked Mrs. Long and respected her as a “Cool teacher.” At the end of the day while walking by a classroom I overheard some teachers says things like “Who does he think he is?” and “Things don’t run that way here.” As I sat at my desk, Argyris (1990) became more relevant to me. I was trying to support teachers and develop a safe environment and teachers were mad at my efforts to support them. I documented my thoughts regarding the teachers feelings toward me.

This behavior is new to me and I can not begin to understand why people would behave in this way. I can not develop effective change in this place. The Teachers here want to survive, that’s all. I have the Assistant Superintendent on one side of me and toxic Teachers on the other side. I am in a no win situation. How do I try to provide students with an effective education program if that is not the focus of the Teachers and central office?

Argyris (1990) was right, if given the opportunity people will forgo change.

### **Backward Discipline**

In the past, teachers would identify students to participate in educational field trips. It was March 2009 and Ms. Vitch wanted to take students on a field trip to an art museum. The names on the trip list were students who did did not follow school procedures and who threatened the safety of other students. Ms. Vitch showed me the list and I told her that I would look it over and get back to her. I removed every student from the list and identified a new group of students that had not had any discipline issues during the three weeks prior to the trip. I approved the list and returned it to Ms. Vitch. There did not seem to be a problem and the students who went on the trip had a positive learning experience.

Later that week Mr. Greek the Gym Teacher walked into my office behaving like a child throwing a tantrum and said, “We need to get some of those students out of the building because I am not going to deal with their behavior!” I replied, “What do you mean out of the building? Why would I let a student out of the building who has been nothing but trouble?” Mr. Greek replied, “Well you deal with it!” I fired back, “Don’t I always? I see you have some issues with this population.” Mr. Greek did not like what I said and stormed out. I could have handled that particular interaction in a more professional manner. However, I believed that Mr. Greek was not acting in the best interest of our students, which drove my reactivity. He was unable to meet the needs of this population. My frustration continued to grow during the conversation because I knew that the only reason he was hired in this district was because his father was on the board of education.

On the car ride home as I pulled into a gas station to get some gas I reflected on how teachers wanted to reward the negative students and get them out of the building and punish the positive students by keeping them in class with no incentive to be productive or positive. Wow! As I made it to the parking lot where I lived, I realized the teachers have developed a clever system to get a personal break from students they do not like or feel like teaching. I could not believe what I was witnessing, teachers trying to make their day better by putting a negative student on a trip to make their day uneventful. As Deal and Peterson (1999) points out, schools are like individual silos in which people organized into camps that are divided by race, ethnic lines, and cohorts who share similar educational philosophies.

I sought to change their way of functioning the very next day. As soon as I entered my office I typed up a memo that informed teachers that every student trip list

would need to be approved by me prior to any trip going off grounds. There was a buzz about my memo all day and teachers who would normally say hello when I walked by just smirked and turned their heads. I did not care if the memo was not well received because there was a negative message being sent to students that was counter productive to basic behavior modification philosophy. To develop the desired behavior the students need a negative stimulus. When the student experiences the negative stimulus they will begin to behave in a manner that will earn them positive rewards. Teachers were teaching students that being negative yielded positive rewards and to me that was criminal. Throughout the week I noticed that the number of discipline referrals increased and teachers were constantly sending students to my office. If they wanted to give me the power to build relationships with students, then it was clear that they were not interested in the overall success of their students but rather an easy job. When I removed the organizational bandage these was an infected sore that oozed a lack of concern for our students. Teachers seemed more worried about everything except the students and that was becoming increasingly frustrating.

I did not waiver from my decision to review student behavior prior to any field trip and after I removed a few students from trips their behavior began to improve. One student revealed “Mr. Jones, you are doing the right thing. No student is supposed to go on a trip if they are bad in school and they know that. The teachers are just looking for a break because they can’t handle us.” In my career I have learned that if you want an honest answer ask a child. This student’s statement validated my leadership decision. The policy made a difference in the culture of the school for both teachers and students. Teachers needed to do their job and teach and students were responsible for their

behavior. As result of this policy change students began to respect the process because it was fair. Not every student was able to go on a trip, however they clearly understood the rationale behind why they were unable to attend an off site event. I was mid-way through the year and I knew that sooner or later I would be getting a call from central office..

### **The Blues**

I walked into my office on Monday feeling scared but ready to meet any challenge the Assistant Superintendent and the disgruntled teachers had in store for me. My fear stemmed from the unknown, not from the organization. I realized that if I focused on the students then I could not go wrong as a leader. As I predicted, Mr. Curtis called requesting a meeting with me to review my mid-year evaluation. I knew my evaluation was not going to be positive and I was ready to hear about all of the things I was not doing right. The meeting was set for Tuesday at 3:30 pm. He came to the school and met with me in my office. He gave me a copy of my evaluation. The evaluation had ten areas of focus with either an acceptable or a non-acceptable rating. Out of the ten areas I was acceptable in eight areas and unacceptable in two areas. The two areas that I was not acceptable in were “leadership”and “policies, and procedures”. He gave me a non-acceptable rating in polices because of the couch situation. He asked me if I had any questions and I said, “ no”. After he left I felt like I was doing something right and a sense of relief centered over me for moment. I used this opportunity, to reflect on my feelings regarding my evaluation from Mr. Curtis, in my audio journal.

I was glad that the meeting was over and that I did not perform as bad as I thought. The stress is getting to me and I cannot sleep. I seem to fight with my own principles and values more so then with my staff or Mr. Curtis. I seem to be

hard wired with a set of beliefs that drive my behavior, which causes me anxiety.

I just need to press on and finish the year.

I already knew that he was trying to get me out of the district so he would be more vigilant in the months to come.

The daily pace of the school kept me attentive all the time. In the absence of support from teachers, I still needed to develop a positive relationship with students to get a sense of their emotional pulse and needs. I realized that if I could serve as a resource for students I could minimize disciplinary referrals. In order to effectively develop change school leaders need to address the individual needs of students (Fullan, 2007). In my efforts, I developed an agreement with three students, who were often volatile and disrespectful, requiring them to speak to me before their frustration escalated into disruptive behavior in the classroom. I believed that building student relationships was vital to meeting their needs and keeping them out of trouble. It was hard to forge these relationships, however, because there was a negative element embedded in the school culture that festered due to a lack of caring. I had an ally in the History Teacher and I met with her often to gain trust so that I could begin my final push to June. I was straightforward with her and I shared “Mrs. Stebee what is going on in this building is terrible and I am asking for your help, will you help me?” She agreed and agreed to alert me if there were teachers trying to cause problems. Meanwhile, I was working diligently on trying to stay out of the crosshairs of Mr. Curtis political artillery scope.

There were times that the teachers did not understand the students because of multiple barriers. For many reasons teachers are sometimes suspicious of administrators which leads to self preservation, distractions that impact learning, and distancing



themselves from their work (Sergiovanni, 1994). For example, one student was not where he was supposed to be and the teacher asked him to return to class. The student replied “Relax son I’m going!” For someone who does not understand the culture and that type of language it would appear that the student was being disrespected to the teacher. Conversely, the term “Son” is equivalent to “Dude or Buddy.” However, the teacher did not have the cultural understanding to see beyond their interpretation of the statement. As I walked toward the situation the teacher asked me to take the student to my office and told the student that he was going to be written up for being disrespectful. No way was I going to let this student be written up because the teacher was unwilling to use this situation as a learning opportunity. I wanted the student to tell me his version of the situation. Vantz explained that he was walking back from the bathroom and saw his friend in another class and walked by the class to say hello. The student stated “I saw Mr. Adams in the hall and he told me to get to class and I did not get mad and said okay”. As I am hearing the student convey his version to me I knew it was accurate. However I asked “Did you say relax son I’m going?” The student stated “yes.” I asked him “do you think that Mr. Adams understood what “son” meant?” In true teenage fashion the student said “I don’t know but I did not do anything wrong to deserve a write-up.”

I was in the middle of a true moral dilemma. I could address the situation without making the teacher feel like I sided with the student or inform the teacher that I will not be holding the student accountable and he would have to deal with my decision. I decided not to write Vantz up. I met with Mr. Adams later that day. He asked me why I was not going to hold the student accountable. I recapped the situation and stated “You are in my office after your contractual time to be here to ask me about a situation that was a

misunderstanding and you want me do something about it right?" He replied "Yes!" I said "No, and if you have a problem with my decision you can always call Mr. Curtis he will listen to you." There was a blatant inequality between the staff and students. I was frustrated that the teachers had a resource in Mr. Curtis and that the students did not have the same level of support.

As I got into my car I turned on some music and zoned out for awhile thinking about the incident with Mr. Adam. I verbalized my thoughts in my audio journal.

My anger got the best of me in this situation. My frustration regarding this year has reached a boiling point in this situation. I feel like he wants to see the student suffer and that mad me angry. I am angry because of the energy he demonstrates to make sure that the student was punished. I need him to show that same enthusiasm when students are trying to make the right decisions, behaving in class, and are following directions. In my opinion, Mr. Adams took the situation personally, which cannot happen when working with this population. Students will see it as a weakness.

I felt like he overreacted and at the same time the student should not be speaking in a casual language. As I further reflected I came to the conclusion that Mountain View is an alternative school and that type of behavior happens when relationships are not fostered. Sergiovanni (1994) contends the web of relationships that connect teachers to students will create and sustain culture. The relationships between the teachers and students were grounded in a lack of trust, disrespect, and disregard for their education. Mr. Adam chose to work in this setting which requires certain degree of fluidity and flexibility that must exist to turn a potentially negative experience for a student to a teachable moment for the

student and the teacher. I felt like Mr. Adam should have followed up with the student, explained how he felt in a positive manner, and supported the student in identifying a more appropriate way to communicate in the future.

As I pulled up to my driveway I shut the car off and pondered a thought that was numerical in nature. I am not good with numbers but this came to me as clear as the sun. I thought about the number of students from diverse backgrounds in the state. Then I wondered what would happen if one situation like this happened everyday in every district in the state how many discipline problems would teachers and administrators face? With a teacher's support, students feel valued and are less likely to disrupt classroom instruction (Fullan, 2007). As I walked into my house I placed my bag on the floor and slumped onto the couch. I placed my head on a pillow trying to clear my mind. I kept thinking, "Maybe I belong in a district that shares my philosophy for educating this non-traditional population."

The next day I met with Vantz and he boldly said "These teachers don't care about us, they just come in for their check and that's it." I have had discipline issues this year that stem from a lack of cultural understanding on the part of the teacher. I could not help but wonder if they cannot understand the students, how are they going to understand me? I left my office thinking about the color of my skin. In my journal, I reflected and wrote about the school culture.

The culture of our students is extremely different than the cultural experiences of the faculty. I am the youngest adult in the building, placing me closer in age to our students. I find that it is easier for me to develop relationships with my students. Maybe it is my age; however I have seen teachers that were older than

many of my current staff, develop positive relationships with students during my tenure at Wood Beach Alternative High School. I think it comes down to a matter of choice. These Teachers choose to be ineffective educators clouded by their cultural beliefs. I am saddened by their behavior because they all possess the ability to be great Teachers.

### **The Pressure is On**

It was now the end of March and spring break was quickly approaching. My plan to build positive relationships was paying big dividends with the overall culture of the school. I did not have any major issues. We had daily issues, however students were in class and if they needed to talk to someone they could go talk to Mrs. Stebee. My day was going well and the Math teacher shared with me that she noticed a positive change at school. She added that she hesitated to share this with me because she was worried that the other teachers would be mad at her. I could not believe her feedback, but I only focused on the compliment and said “I think that it is a collective effort.” She replied “I don’t think so Mr. Jones you are swimming up stream.” What do you say to that comment? It was validating that the math teacher referred to me as a fish swimming up a river. At 1:55 pm Mr. Curtis strolled through the front doors of the school and said, “Good afternoon Mr. Jones I want to observe your dismissal procedure.” I said, “Then you are right on time.” Things ran smoothly and we had no problems. He then asked if we could meet to discuss the certification process of a teacher. After he was done he walked out of my office and instead of walking toward the front door he walked to Mrs. Titch’s classroom. After I watched him enter her classroom, I walked to my office, closed my door. After he left I just walked to my car and left the building. I decided to reflect on

the situation further by talking into my audio journal. When I talked about my daily events, it brought a clear and vivid picture as to the political pressures that were being placed upon me.

I am giving this man too much power. I need to stop thinking about failure and just lean on my principles regarding our students. It is clear that his agenda is to remove me from this position and I have accepted that fact. I know that my leadership has positively impacted students. I will press on knowing that doing the right thing by students must supersede the needs of the teachers. They have made it painfully clear to me that they have no moral fiber and will do whatever it takes to see me go.

Later that evening I called Dr. Harvey to tell him what was going on in my new position. I began by saying “The administration here does not support me the way you did and I feel like I am not wanted.” He said “Tell me what is going on.” I told him everything that happened not leaving anything out. When I was done he asked one question. He said “Did you at any point put students in harm’s way?” I replied, “Absolutely not!” He said, “Then LeRoi there is something else going on.” He told me to finish out the year and if I needed to call him I could anytime. I felt some relief and comfort that my old boss still believed in me. I spent the afternoon reflecting on how I wanted to finish the year.

### **A Reflective Rest**

It was spring break and all the administrators in the district were given three days off. I used the time to find out who I was as a person and to put the year in perspective. I would often revisit discipline referrals, phone calls to parents, and statements that students would make about the teachers. As I sifted through the content I analyzed my

behavior. For example, I needed to call a parent because his son was disrespectful toward the gym teacher. The student called him an “Asshole.” I called his mother and she told me that she did not care what happened to him and I should call his father. She provided me with the number and I called. The father did not want to be involved because he could not address his behavior. At this point I could suspend the student or try to have him take ownership for his behavior. Eventually he apologized to the gym teacher. Later that day he walked in to my office and said “Mr. Jones I only apologized because you asked me too. I still think he is an asshole.”

Random thoughts entered my head as I reflected on my leadership. This is what I wrote in my journal:

I could have suspended the student and I would have been right. There is something more than just being right. I want to effect change, and change does not happen with punishment alone. It would have made the Teacher feel better, but the student would not have learned how to address this type of situation in the future. The student did apologize and I was proud of him. I know he does not like the Gym Teacher however, he decided to think about the situation on his own, process his feelings, and made the best decision for his wellbeing.

As I continued to ponder my choices I realized that I was making decisions that were right for students and I felt better. The possibility that the district may not renew my contract was looming heavy and I could not stop thinking about possibly being a failure. I explained the situation to my Fiancée regarding my issues at work and I felt better. Good or bad at least she knew. I remembered in graduate school I took a class that talked about

ethics and how it was essential to leadership. I took some time to reflect on why I wanted to be an administrator.

I reviewed and analyzed interactions with students, parents, and teachers and for some unknown reason I starting thinking about my football career. For example, when I needed to make a big play and my body wanted to quit I was faced with a personal ethical decision. Do I quit and blame someone else or push myself to unknown limits? I could have blamed the offense, the defensive line, or the defensive backs, but doing things that were right was important to me. Leaders step up to the challenges of leadership. I never quit in anything that I attempted and I was not going to start! I accepted those challenges with stewardship, motivation, and dedication. I figured that if I could lead forty football players to a national bowl appearance I could finish the year at Mountain View with the same determination. I wrote two words in my journal “Don’t Quit!” I walked out of my home office determined to finish the year as a professional with pride, dignity, and integrity. I spent the rest of my vacation focusing on how to support students.

### **The Struggling Servant Leader**

**Final push.** It was my first day back from spring break and my first phone call was from Mr. Curtis. It was now April and it was time for my end of year evaluation so the Assistant Superintendent wanted to meet April 24<sup>th</sup> at 3:15pm. I agreed and he asked how everything was going. I said fine and asked if he needed anything else. He said he would see me on the 24<sup>th</sup>. The whole week my stomach was in knots and I could not eat anything. I had two major issues that occurred and knew no matter how I handled these two difficult situations, there would be something Mr. Curtis would criticize. The first situation was bizarre to say the least. Students were dismissed for the day and got on the

bus to go home. Ten minutes after all of the buses left I got a phone call from the bus company that there was a fight and one of the students involved in the fight opened the emergency door located in the back of the bus, jumped out, ran across the street, and jumped into a car with someone he did not know.

I got into my car drove to the location of the bus and the cops gave me the same report as the bus company. While the police interviewed the students on the bus one of the officers received a call from their dispatcher who stated “The other student is at the police station.” I asked the police if they had a Nurse on staff and they said no. I drove back to the school to call the parents of the student who jumped of the back of the bus. I explained to his parent that her son was involved in a fight and I recommended that he go to the hospital. I gave her all the details and she agreed that he should go to the hospital. After everything was done I had to call Mr. Curtis to inform him of the situation. He asked if the student was safe, if I called the parents and asked me to send him a report within 24 hours. In situations in which there was police involvement I made sure that all of my documentation was as accurate as possible. As I drove home that day I felt my heart beating very fast and had to pull my car over to the side of the road and catch my breath. I finally got myself together and something clicked in me and I was empowered, angered, and confident all at the same time. Right then and there on the side of the road near a golf course I knew that I did not want to be at Mountain View anymore. If he did not fire me I was sure I would resign. My performance evaluation could not come soon enough!

It was April 24 the day of my evaluation. I was looking forward to it. He knocked on my door and walked in and called my name. I said “I have been looking forward to



this meeting.” He paid me no mind and got right down to business.” He again gave me a copy of my observation and I thought it would be a 5 out of 10 evaluation. To my surprise I earned a seven out of a possible ten. In my evaluation he highlighted leadership as an issue. My anxiety drifted away and I thought to myself “There is nothing he can do now.” So I said “I would not change my leadership and given the opportunity to do it again I would not change my leadership philosophy.” He explained to me that he would not be recommending me for rehire. I replied “I do not want to come back.” He gave me the option to resign and I said I needed to think about it. I was relieved and glad but was not out of the woods. I had to figure out what to do.

I came home and told Diana what happened and she told me to do what I thought was best and she would support any decision I made. I was so relieved because I wanted to resign. I needed to call Dr. Harvey to get his perspective. I reached out to him over the weekend. He adamantly told me not to resign. He said “LeRoi, he wants you to resign to save money.” I said “I don’t understand.” He offered “LeRoi the district has to pay for your unemployment and unemployment will cost the district \$30,000 per year you are on unemployed.” As I thought about what Dr. Harvey said I was even more appalled by the Assistant Superintendent’s behavior. All this time he has been questioning my leadership. Not only did I question his leadership! I questioned his integrity! He knew that I had a newborn baby yet behaved in a manner that was self serving, immoral and unethical. As I reflected it became clear to me that it was just politics. The next day I called him and told him I would not resign. He did not recommend me for rehire and I did not care. The last day was quickly approaching and I needed to focus on completing all of my responsibilities to the end in a professional manner. It was the June 16<sup>th</sup> and one day

before graduation. I was glad that this negative experience would soon be over. I verbalized my reflections in my audio journal.

Its over! I have nothing more to say to him and at this point he played the only card he has which was not re-hiring me. A small part of me wanted to use all my sick and vacation days so that I would never have to see that place again. I will not miss a day and finish like a leader. I can control what I do from this point on and I choose to finish strong. I will not forget what happened here this year and I do not regret anything that I did because my leadership impacted students and I am proud of that fact!

### **Last Day**

June 17<sup>th</sup> was the last day of school for students and graduation. The day was easy and many of the students were done with their finals. The seniors arrived at 1:15 pm for a the 2:00 pm graduation ceremony. At the ceremony I called all the names of the seniors up to receive their diplomas, gave my speech on education and emphasized how important it was to have an education. After I was done speaking, two seniors wrote speeches and wanted to read them to their family members. Chris was one of my toughest students. He would always curse at teachers and on one occasion I contemplated having him removed from the school. As he started reading his speech both his parents began to cry. I was surprised he mentioned me in his speech. He said “I would like to thank Mr. Jones for never giving up on us and believing in us.” I must admit I was moved and tears welled up in my eyes. If Chris could understand why I did the things I was held accountable for then I think it is safe to say that the people at Mountain View will never see education the way I do. From a servant leadership perspective I wanted to provide

students with the opportunity to compete in life. I thought that if I supported my staff that would translate into a healthy culture for students. I was wrong! It was clear from my staffs' behavior that they did not respect my leadership approach and did not value me as a person. I was grounded in an ethic of care for all students and I was not going to let toxic teachers uproot my leadership.

That Monday was the last day for teachers. They were required to view a video on differentiated instruction and then they were free to go. The video was an hour long and after it was over I addressed the staff for the last time. I said "Thank you for the opportunity and have a great summer. I could have made them stay until 12:00 pm, which was their contractual obligation. I didn't require them to stay because I had a few staff that I valued and I wanted to see them before they left. I would not allow myself to lower my ethical standards to the level of unprofessional people. My goal was to protect my integrity and I believed that I left Mountain View with that construct intact.

### **Conclusion**

As I began my year at Mountain View I reflected on my personal obligations as a parent with a new child and how extreme familial stressors impacted my professional responsibilities. My fiancée and I were in the process of buying a house and I became a new father for the second time. The stress was not rapid but rather slow and painful. I was not sure that my old formula of hard work and determination would pull me through this unique and challenging professional position. During my tenure at Mountain View I faced some of the unhappiest people in my life. My staff was not worried about change nor did they want change to occur.

The dysfunction was normal to them and they viewed any changes that I tried to implement as unwanted stressors. I expected students to be immature but not trained educated professionals. I would often wonder how they would behave if their children were receiving this type of inadequate education. Teachers did not build relationships with students which created a power struggle between the teachers and the students. Students would not complete their assignments in class, were disrespectful to teachers, and would often walk out of class because they felt they were not learning anything. My staff seemed detached from our population and tried to blame students for their lack of effort. Any attempts I made to change their perception were deemed a threat to the current culture. I finally put the pieces together. If I did make the changes that I set out to implement then that would mean the teachers would have to work! I often reflected on the many opportunities that were lost to my students because my staff seemed to be disengaged from their lives. For example, many of our students had issues with confidence which affected their education. I believed that by changing the culture, the self esteem of the students would have increased their confidence to learn. The most difficult part of my leadership experience at Mountain View was not having the resources to develop my ideas.

The autoethnographic research design allowed me to delve deeper into the heart of the problems that faced Mountain View. Through reflective practice I was constantly challenging myself to improve the instructional experience for my students. Through this autoethnographic research design I was accountable for documenting the success and failures that culminated in my lived professional experiences. As the self researcher, I was obligated to analyze my experiences in an organized truthful account that focused on

me and how I addressed the challenges within this alternative educational setting. My toughest challenge was looking at my failures as the instructional leader. As I reflected I have learned that change develops when failure is recognized, understanding why it happened, and changing future outcomes through reflective practice. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting critically on the self, *auto*; an ability to notice our responses to the self within a social context world (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

I have learned that competence reinforces confidence in the position of leadership. Developing positive relationships with students was a skill that allowed me to feel confident in my leadership analysis. I knew that I was the only person in the building that resonated with this unique population. That gave me a sense of confidence that what I was doing was right. However, not understanding internal politics and being reprimanded elicited feelings of incompetence and insecurity. I struggled with these feelings throughout the year and often questioned if I could be an effective educational leader. The reflection process was difficult to face especially with when it stirred up feelings of insecurity.

I realized that I did not have any support or guidance and my decisions would be scrutinized regardless of the outcome. I began to see that I was very hard on myself and did not understand that there were other factors that working against me that were out of my control. My staff fabricated stories that directly attacked my integrity as a person, instructional leader, and advocate for academic achievement. I could not change how they felt about me and realized that they would not change. I have learned that for some teachers students are not the priority and as a leader I need to recognize that type of behavior early to develop and implement strategies that will hold teachers accountable. I

kept my focus on students and I believe that I had a positive impact on their life. I was supportive, listened to their needs, and was interested in they lives outside of school. I was able to experience my critical moments as the instructional leader through an autoethnographic gaze. Through my experiences I understood that I did not fully comprehend the culture of the school and how it eventually contributed to my frustration, stress, and in many cases professional disappointments. The student population at Mountain View needed a skilled staff that was able to meet the needs of this non-traditional population. Their focus was not on student success but rather on how to survive in a dysfunctional academic environment. My enthusiasm was met with disgruntled behavior which contributed to my unhealthy leadership experience.

My hope is that through my leadership experience I can positively impact a fellow colleague with written support facing similar challenges. We are charged with a difficult responsibility and when students are the primary priority success will eventually surface. I am privileged to have been apart of the lives of my students. They have shown me that with determination and persistence success is possible in any situation. Reflective practice has become a process in which I will continue to utilize to analyze my leadership, school culture, and guide my decision making process. I documented my experiences in these two different alternative academic settings, in my audio journal.

During my tenure at Wood Beach Alternative High School I was given the freedom to develop change. This was done with the support of the central office, the new Teachers that I hired, and the administrative support staff. I evaluated the curriculum, the internal architecture of each classroom, and how students and teachers perceived their environment. It was apparent that the building was not a

welcoming place for students and teachers. I observed their reactions daily, to get a clear picture of how they interpreted their educational surrounding. The students would disregard school procedures, disregard school property, and leave paper in the classrooms. I would hold students accountable for their actions by empowering them to think about their actions and how they affect others. As a result of this leadership process teachers and students became engaged in the process of learning, and began to value their educational environment. For example, when I ordered new computers for the school, I challenged students to take ownership of their educational environment. I was able to stimulate meaningful student-teacher interactions. I challenged myself, my Teachers, and the students to meet their full potential, by developed a community that was collaborative, which focused on shared responsibility. On the other hand, Mountain View Alternative High School was extremely different. The culture was embraced by a toxic organizational cloud. In my efforts to support Teachers I provided opportunities such as modeling to build relationships with students, professional development in learning how to facilitate positive peer groups, and supporting staff, in an effort to address our unique student population. My efforts did not fully develop into a school wide cultural change. I did not have the support from the central office. Teachers were not willing to try new initiatives, and the students felt marginalized by the teachers. My experience at Mountain View was deeply impacted by the behaviors of the Teachers. My efforts to develop change depended on what Teachers did and thought about the environment in which they work. I believe students can learn if given respect as

individuals and were supported by Teachers. As the leader, I had to make a decision that ultimately effected my employment.

I will take these experiences with me as I navigate my way through future leadership experiences.



## **Chapter VII**

### **Leadership**

#### **Introduction**

The effectiveness of my leadership involved utilizing my past personal experiences through which I made decisions that directly affected students and teachers to inform decision making. It was my espoused belief that transactional leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and social justice leadership was embedded in my espoused leadership theory. Through my leadership analysis my espoused leadership theory was reconfigured, which reflected my leadership principles and values in a new light. As a result of my research analysis, my leadership in-use is uniquely different. My espoused leadership was framed by past personal experiences and was similar to my current theory in-use.

In this chapter I discuss what leadership philosophies impacted me as the educational leader in two different educational environments. Servant leadership and social justice leadership continued to be the underpinnings of my leadership platform, however after reflecting upon this autoethnographic analysis I realized I wanted to focus on the paradigms of leadership that critically impacted me which include transactional leadership, ethic of care, transformational leadership, and visionary leadership.

My leadership experience shaped my future behaviors, goals, and interactions with teachers and students through deep reflection. I found that mistakes happen and I will never avoid them. As I reflect on my experiences with teachers, students and central office administration I have realized that my espoused leadership theory is subjective not objective. My leadership is directly connected to my lived experiences and as such my

style of leadership is unique and distinctive to address my perceived or actual issues facing education. My leadership generated reactions from teachers that were both exciting yet discouraging. My leadership style in both settings challenged me to look inward at the rationale behind my actions. During my leadership experience I tried to influence others through a shared vision that would foster a foundation for organizational change. Through my past personal experiences I developed a theoretical framework for my leadership. My espoused leadership platform is comprised of transactional, transformational, servant, and social justice leadership theories, pillars upon which I stand in order to embark upon the challenges facing school administration. As a result of my autoethnographic analysis I have developed a different perspective on my leadership through my intensely personalized autoethnographic analysis which has offered valuable insight into how to affect change within two educational settings.

Collaborative environments do exist in public schools as was evident during my tenure at Wood Beach. I encouraged collaborative relationships and provided opportunities for partnerships to form. In doing so, I made leadership the responsibility of every teacher to create a sense of ownership and climate conducive to sharing goals (Bolman & Deal, 2003). I was able analyze my leadership through a reflective telescope which provided a clear understanding of my leadership analysis. As a part of my autoethnographic experience as the building administrator, I required teachers to possess attributes that would have a positive impact on student performance and attitudes that fostered behaviors which promoted a positive school culture. Teachers were open to working with a culturally diverse population at Wood Beach Alternative High School. As the instructional leader I had the unique opportunity to impact this marginalized student

population by accommodating their educational needs. Inspiring students to believe in the process of education was my priority as the building administrator in two educational settings. I was empathetic to the complexities that surround the lived educational experiences my students. My leadership focused on the students and permeated outward to the teachers and parents. All successful change initiatives develop collaboration where there was none before (Fullan, 2007). I was able to build positive relationship with students as a result of small social interactions that encouraged respect from the students. I was patient with students and created opportunities for academic change to develop in student behavior (Sergiovanni, 1994). In an effort to foster respect, I first demonstrated how respect looked, sounded, and behaved through my leadership approach. There was great opportunity for positive change as the self researcher in two educational settings. I struggled to find my balance between administrative mandates from the state and federal levels and providing a quality education for students. As I evaluate my espoused leadership theory, I learned that my leadership inspired students to reach their academic potential by fostering an environment that promoted individual growth in each student.

### **Transactional Leadership**

The school administrator is immersed in the liquidity of state and federal school policy, daily operations of their school, and community outreach. Transactional leadership behaviors (Bass, 1985) are aimed at monitoring and controlling employees through rational or economic means. Although I espoused transactional leadership as a part of my espoused leadership theory, I often did not utilize the tenets of this leadership paradigm. I believed that I could effect change through collaboration with teachers, if I simultaneously created professional boundaries that encouraged responsibility.. Gladwell

(2002) explains that all people have valuable skills and gifts that make them unique. The Law of a Few, according to Gladwell, states that social epidemics can be altered by a small number of people. As a result of my autoethnographic analysis I learned that to develop a culture that was supportive I needed to make connections with my faculty in an effort to raise the level of student expectations.

Transactional leadership did not afford me with this opportunity. Prior to my leadership experience, I believed that teachers and educational personnel would provide every student with academic rigor grounded in high expectations. As I reflect on my leadership experience I have learned that teachers vary in their level of commitment and passion. Further, I realized that although transactional leadership was not a significant part of my espoused leadership theory, I now understand the value of how this leadership paradigm can impact climate and culture in an organization. As I move forward I will need to continue my development in a transactional leadership paradigm. Teachers commit to the terms of their contract and are obligated to meet the needs of their students. The transactional leadership paradigm ensures that the behaviors within an organization reflect the policies, procedures, and contract agreement that were agreed upon by all personnel. Transactional leadership does not attempt to change behavior intrinsically but rather through extrinsic rewards and accountability (Burns, 1978). Through my personalized experiences I realized that leaders that rely solely on the transactional approach hide behind policy. As I reflected on my leadership analysis I realize that I am not a transactional leader. I believe transactional leaders are managers and do little to foster change meaningful change. Through my autoethnographic analysis I experienced

meaningful change personally and professionally which was embedded in an ethic of care.

### **Ethic of Care**

As a former special education student, I understand what it feels like to be ignored, underestimated, and not cared for. Very often, I would sit through classes not understanding the information that was being taught to me, and equally often, the teacher that was responsible for teaching me the material, simply did not care. When I asked for help, I would have the same information delivered and given to me in its original form or spoken a little louder. Clearly my issue was not that I was hard of hearing, but the information just sat in the air hanging, waiting for me to digest it and make meaning of it. I remember how teachers would just send me to someone else for help which afforded me an opportunity to sit quietly and just hope to not be called upon for an answer.

This experience of not being cared for, ignored, and ultimately silenced, is the underpinning of my espousal of social justice through the ethic of care. Those early experiences have shaped the man that I have become today. According to Nell Noddings (2007), who shares that she was also deeply influenced by her own experiences as a student, schooling played a central role in her life, and her early experiences with caring teachers contributed to a life long interest in student teacher relations. Just as it was for Noddings (2007), schooling has also shaped my passion for students who sit in classrooms feeling devalued and ignored. The ethic of care in education requires both breadth and depth of knowledge about education. At the very least, an educational leader should have a defensible position on the aims of education, on a theory of motivation, and on what constitutes ethical practice (Noddings, 2006). The idea of caring involves

seeing oneself as connected to others within a web of various relationships. Within the context of the relationship, the self as a moral agent perceives and responds to the perceptions of student and teacher need (Gilligan, 1982).

Noddings (2007) asserts that education, in its widest sense, is central to the cultivation of caring in society. Have American school systems served as examples of caring institutions for the students that they are suppose to serve? Education historically was either for the wealthy or the select few who could afford it. The institution of education should be a community mecca of cognitive exchange that fosters academic growth thorough rigor (Sergiovannia, 2004). Noddings (2007) asserts that the whole orientation of school systems in most advanced capitalist countries are geared toward “skilling” for the needs of business and the economy. Some attention is paid to personal, social, and life education, but it generally remains woefully inadequate when set against the demands of care theory (Noddings, 2007).

Through my personal experiences I have learned that life is a cycle of success and failure and the ratio between these two constructs is ultimately determined by my effort to continue to grow and learn. I have faced many challenging experiences, and each incident provided a platform on which to build upon. My leadership was directly related to my personal struggles which are a reflection of me as a person, life long learner, and school leader. My leadership platform was shaped by my unique encounters of my past. My passion for the non-traditional learner has empowered me to develop change that offers the opportunity for this population to experience academic success. The body of research related to school leadership discusses the challenges school leaders face as educational administrators. The literature analyzes the challenges school leaders face as

agents of change, identifies current issues that inundate the process of change, and the impact of leadership on the institution of education. Ethical care has only fostered meaningful relationships with staff and students that were grounded in a transformational paradigm.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders articulate a vision of the future of the organization, provide a model that is consistent with that vision, foster the acceptance of group goals, and provide individualized support (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). Given the scope and responsibilities that are placed upon school administrators, it is apparent that a shared vision is needed to formulate change for our twenty-first century students.

Transformational leadership seeks to empower faculty to revisit old problems and develop new strategies for change (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1990). As the instructional leader in two educational settings I implemented a transformational leadership approach. In Wood Beach for example, transformational leadership was a successful leadership style that fostered change and new cultural behaviors grounded in an ethic of care for our students. However, in Mountain View this leadership paradigm did not yield similar results. My many efforts to implement change were inhibited by teachers who resisted my ideas of change. Transformational leadership through my autoethnographic analysis was my leadership theory in-use.

My personal educational experiences have motivated me to embrace this leadership style in future leadership positions. I believe that when the right people are hired, then a collaborative vision can be developed and implemented. During my leadership experience at Wood Beach I was able to experience the success of a cultural

change that resulted in student success. As I continue my journey in educational leadership, I will look for teachers who are committed to teaching, willing to develop a positive relationship with their students, and who have a passion for teaching which is apparent by engagement of their students. When those components are present, then it is the responsibility of the instructional leader to provide the resources to foster change.

### **Servant Leadership**

The term servant-leader was first coined in 1970 by Greenleaf (1978) to describe an age old concept. Good leaders, ironically, are seen as servants first. I believe that when teachers feel supported and valued by actions and behaviors they will perform their responsibilities with vigor. Covey (1998) describes servant-leadership as, "a principle, a natural law". Covey contends that when support and encouragement is present within an organization the response will give way to positive outcomes. I espoused in my leadership platform that I am a servant leader ready to support, encourage, and provide meaningful feedback that will foster change within scope of my leadership responsibilities. I found myself torn between what I know to be right and the choices I made throughout my highly personalized analysis.

Emotionally I felt the need as the instructional leader to always look cool, calm, and collected with the premise that I am always willing to give a helping hand. I have found that servant leadership is difficult and at times tugged against my personal values as a person. For example, during my experience at Mountain View it became apparent that the teachers did not value my support, which was evident by their meetings with the Assistant Superintendent. It was difficult to continue to provide these teachers with the same support and value as the other staff.



In an alternative setting I understood that I was working for the disenfranchised student that struggled to meet their educational goals. This student population resonated with me because of my own struggles as a special education student. The educational experience of the students was my responsibility and I tried my best to identify current resources such as technology, innovative curriculums, and teaching strategies that would benefit this population. One of the many responsibilities of the instructional leader is be an advocate for the student, to make sure that they are given an education that meets their needs. Through a social justice leadership perspective Greene (1995) encourages educators to look at the realities of our world, the harshness and the horror, to find ways to create situations in which people will choose to engage in cooperative or collective action in order to bring about societal repairs . While many have justly criticized the field of educational leadership for its tendencies to reinforce social hierarchies, Rapp (2002), contends that is not the whole story.

We as school leaders understand the challenges that impact school performance. We are advocates by the positions we hold. Our primary responsibility is to promote positive educational gains through innovative avenues. Social justice leadership resonates with the young boy in me who was a struggling special education student. My personal path to educational attainment was rigorous. However during my journal toward educational enlightenment, I experienced several unique people who valued me and fought for me to have the same educational opportunities that were afforded to others. As a school leader it is my responsibility to implement and advocate for change. Through my personal lived experiecnes I could recognize the essential elements of quality teaching which was grounded in my blief that students needed caring adults to foster student

motivation. As I reflect on my leadership theory I believe that I am a visionary for change.

### **Visionary Leadership**

I struggled to integrate the meaning and function of my leadership throughout this autoethnographic analysis. I have discussed my espoused leadership in previous chapters and through my personalized experiences I have come to understand my unique attributes that define me and my leadership. Sergiovanni (1994) characterizes vision as an "educational platform" that incorporates the school's beliefs about the preferred aims, methods, and climate, thereby creating a "community of mind" that establishes behavioral norms. Our future generations are the responsibility of current teachers, school leaders, and parents. Principals must create a climate and a culture for change. Clearly, the Principal plays a pivotal role in shaping the vision—sometimes single-handedly. In the hands of an articulate, persuasive leader, a distinctive personal vision may be far more attractive than a something-for-everyone group product. As long as the vision is one that people in the organization can embrace, authorship is irrelevant (Fritz, 1996).

Through my leadership analysis I found that when I was excited and enthusiastic, students would begin to gravitate toward me. I would always discuss my vision with students. My vision exhibited in my verbal and non-verbal daily behavior developed over time through collaboration. Principals do this by speaking about the vision often and enthusiastically, by encouraging experiments, by celebrating successes and forgiving failures, and by remaining steadfast in the face of the inevitable problems and missteps (Elmore, 1996). I realize to change the current educational system so that all students can be competitive in our global society leadership must forgive situational failure. Trying

new concepts, leading from an unconventional paradigm, or thinking about old ideas from a new perch epitomize my leadership. It is not enough to create a vision statement, the school leader should breath, talk, and embody the vision way before the ink touches the paper. Many leaders believe vision development is a straightforward task of articulating a statement of beliefs and then implementing it. However, some studies suggest that vision is more of an evolutionary process as opposed to a one-time event. It is a process that requires continuous reflection, action, and reevaluation( Hong, 1996). Through reflective practice I have continuously pondered my leadership. The vision I created during my experience at Wood Beach was fostered through shared understanding of our student population by implementing best practices embedded in an ethic of care. Conley (1996) says that vision exists when people in an organization share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes, and goals that guide their behavior. More simply, he calls it "an internal compass." I had a vision that was an extension of my leadership that required that the organization embrace my values. During my time at Mountain View, I found it clear that my leadership was not a congruent match for the district. On the other hand, I found that the students in both educational setting responded in a positive manner to the respect that I offered. The teachers at Mountain View would not embrace my vision nor did they understand my behavior when working with students, and in most cases did not seem to care. In this next section I answered my research questions to intensify my understanding of my autoethnographic analysis.

### **Research Questions**

My research questions provided me with a compass in which to explore my leadership by placing myself in close proximity of my lived experiences. My focus and

direction was shaped by my research questions regarding reflective practice, my espoused leadership theory, how I as the leader affected culture, and how an autoethnographic research methodology shaped my view of leadership through my own personalized endoscope. Question one asked: How can the use of reflective practice bring clarity to my leadership development while leading an alternative high school environment? Through my experiences, I have learned that thinking can be one, two, or three dimensional, depending upon the reflective lens. For the purpose of this research design I needed to explore all reflective dimensions. For example, when I entered Wood Beach I was thinking in a one dimensional paradigm. I would make statement to myself like “I need to make change” and “I will impact culture.” I would think about how I was going to address issues facing me as a leader. I would think about my vision and what was important from my perspective. My anxiety was extremely high because I was not thinking about the other actors in my building and I often found myself feeling overwhelmed with stress and inadequacy. I thought that as the leader change needed to be implemented by me. I would reflect on how I would change the culture at Wood Beach without considering the larger perception.

As I continued to reflect, I started to have moments of enlightenment that offered clarity into my leadership. I began to realize through reflective practice that change was not solely my responsibility, but rather a collaboration of the entire faculty. As I began to empower the staff at Wood Beach, change became mutual goal. I began to view change from a two dimensional model the encompassed the teachers and staff as a major part of my overall vision. Through reflection I began to feel confident that my staff would embrace my vision for change. I changed my thinking from a one dimensional lens to a

two dimensional bifocal, which I thought would further enhance the culture of Wood Beach. I arrived at these critical moments through reflection and detailed documentation, which provided clarity for me as the school leader. Thinking about my decisions and documenting important moments through reflection preserved my experiences.

As I further utilized the tenets of reflective practice I began to think about the students and how I could infuse their input into my vision. I began to think in a three dimensional paradigm by incorporating the students as part of the over all change. I provided them with the opportunity to talk with me or a member of my faculty to develop trust and clearly explain the policies of the school, which challenged them to reach for their educational goals. As I continued to reflect from a three dimensional perspective I began to understand that the skills needed to effectively utilize reflective practice was the constant repetition of thought through multiple vantage points. I began to understand that when I trained myself to think about my failures as well as my accomplishments, I gained a more meaningful understanding of who I was as a leader.

Through reflective practice I was challenged to peel back layers of past experiences, my espoused leadership, and my decisions as a leader and critically examine my results. I could not hide from any decision I made, which placed a tremendous amount of anxiety on me. I did not make a decision without reflecting which challenged me to develop multiple vantage points for reflection.

Question two asked: How did my leadership theory in use impact an alternative high school environment? I wish I could say that my results from my leadership theory in-use offered positive results in two alternative educational settings. The truth is that although Wood Beach provided me with a framework in which to develop and implement

change, Mountain View offered a unique set of circumstances that changed my leadership. I will address this question from two perspectives, one from my experiences working with the teachers at Mountain View and the second from the students that I served.

The teachers at Mountain View challenged my leadership all the time. I tried to implement new initiatives that promoted positive relationships with students. I was supportive and encouraged teachers to try new ways to develop trust with students. When I realized that the teachers would not change, I knew that I had to change my leadership. The challenge that knowledge posed for me was that I did not know how. I needed to be a transactional leader and, because I had a limited amount of leadership experience grounded in this approach, I found this position to be frustrating. I was focused on change while they were determined to attack my integrity. I saw the potential in their ability, and they wanted to keep to keep the functional dysfunction as a part of their culture.

Many times during my tenure at Mountain View I found myself reflecting on why they are not willing to at the very least try to do something new. The strategies they had in place currently did not work, which was evident from the negative behavior of the students. I realized that I did not have the transactional leadership skills necessary to address their behaviors. I was also faced with the lack of support from central administration, which placed me in a challenging position. I did not receive support and I was left to find my own resources to lead such a dysfunctional staff. As I reflected, I realized that effectively utilizing the transactional leadership approach was a weakness for me and at times I shied away from implementing this leadership strategy. Through my

reflective process I asked myself “If I challenge these teachers will I have the support of central office?” and I would always arrive at the same answer “No!”

My leadership shifted from developing change to protecting my integrity as a leader. Though my reflective experiences it became clear that the teachers were trying to assassinate my character as a leader. This was evident when I would receive calls from Mr. Curtis regarding issues that were not accurate. In response to their unprofessional behavior, I focused my efforts on leading my students at Mountain View. I was able to develop relationships with students that reflected parts of my leadership paradigm that gave me an opportunity to serve them. I utilized transformational leadership to foster a supportive environment separate from for the dysfunctional atmosphere that was created by the teachers. For example, if I had reason to believe that the teacher was unfairly challenging a student, I would not support the teacher. As I reflected on my decision I felt that my decisions would not impact the over negative culture that already existed in the school. I knew that the teachers would not support me. However, I knew that I needed to make sure that the students would have a place where they felt supported. There were many times that I felt I was not leading, but rather surviving as a leader. I became aware of the policies and began to follow them as accurately as possible so that I could minimize any negative behavior from the teachers. As I continued to work with students, it was clear that they had a profound respect for me which was evident by their behavior. I would ask students to behave in class and they would respond with “I will for you Mr. Jones but I hate that teacher.” I would always follow up with that student and say thank you for supporting the school. My leadership theory in-use had a positive impact on the

students. Conversely, my transformational leadership approach did not positively impact the overall culture of Mountain View.

My third question asked: How did climate and culture impact my leadership development? The climate and culture of both alternative educational settings impacted me as a leader. My experiences at Wood Beach encouraged me to support my faculty; while at Mountain View I learned about the school dysfunction and it impacted the direction of my leadership. During my time at Wood Beach I was able to try new and innovative strategies to change the school culture. I worked with a staff that was open to new ideas and eager to learn new ways to change the culture of the school. They valued education and built meaningful relationships with students. I utilized a transformational leadership paradigm during my time at Wood Beach that was embraced by the Dr. Harvey. The culture of Wood Beach needed to be changed, which was clear from the feedback from Lina and Pam, my secretaries. The culture directed me to implement change, and it was the support that I received from Dr. Harvey and my staff that assisted me in making the changes.

On the other hand, the culture at Mountain View impacted my leadership from a less constructive perspective. This experience provided me with the opportunity to look within myself in order to address culture. I tried to change the culture of Mountain View, but was not successful. The political elements that were not always visible became road blocks that impeded change. My leadership was impacted by the negative behaviors of the teachers and their response to my decisions. I learned that integrity and the passion for education became pillars which I leaned on to foster student growth.



I was unable to effect change within the teaching faculty, so I decided to develop the students by modeling positive behaviors that fostered change from the bottom up. For example, when students would become angry I challenged them to use their communication skills to tell the teachers how they were feeling. I offered them opportunities to meet with me to discuss their feelings and time to deescalate. I felt restricted during my time at Mountain View, yet wholeheartedly believe that my experience was valuable. I created a small change in the student population and I was proud of that accomplishment given my limited resources. I have learned through reflective practice that a dysfunctional environment requires a transactional leadership approach. I now realize that I should have addressed negative inappropriate behavior from this leadership paradigm before I tried to implement change.

Question four asked: How was the autoethnographic research design a useful technique for detecting my leadership? Through this autoethnographic analysis, I deeply reflected on my own personal feelings, decisions, and impact that I as the self researcher introduced into these educational setting. Through the practice of reflection, I explored past personal experiences and developed a new understanding through the lens of reflection. Wood Beach provided me with the opportunity to impact non-traditional students through my leadership as an instructional leader. I believed that my students could be future leaders regardless of circumstance, family dynamics, or socio-economic status. I radiated this belief in my attitude toward education, my introspective approach toward building positive relationships with students, and an unwavering belief that they could achieve. The autoethnographic approach challenged me to focus on me as the

primary stimuli that impacted the climate and culture of Wood Beach. The process offered me the opportunity to challenge myself to become a better leader.

On the other hand, Mountain View challenged me to look at more than leadership. This research methodology provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon my ethical code and how my past life experiences directed my leadership. During my tenure at Mountain View, I found myself frustrated at the behavior of the teachers. I did not value the virtues of the staff and as a result I walked into an organization that I perceived as culturally dilapidated and dysfunctional. Through this autoethnographic lens I analyzed my integrity as a person. As I reflect, I have come to understand that leadership is a multifaceted position. I have used the autoethnographic research design to focus my lived experiences in an organized sequence of experiences that I can use as a resource for future leadership positions. This research methodology offered clear examples of my success as well as my failures as a leader which I will use to further refine my in-use leadership.

### **Conclusion**

My leadership experience has been rewarding, insightful, and has provided a wealth of knowledge that will continue to shape my leadership in-use. I feel as if I have grown tremendously as a result of conducting a highly personalized research study which provided me the opportunity to collect meaningful data through reflective practice. I have a new appreciation for school administration. I realize that my experience will support my future leadership post. My experiences have reshaped my philosophy on leadership, which I will use to confront current and future challenges in education. We need to move forward and understand others in a deep robust manner. It is important as leaders to dive

deep into the personalities of our teachers and colleagues to gain a better understanding of their perception of life. Once we know why people behave in a specific manner, we can begin to methodically extinguish old behaviors and build new ones. “Let us go forward with an empty cup and fill it with understanding and compassion for others.” Sergiovanni (1994) explains that it takes just one person who is passionate enough to align themselves with the espoused theory of an organization and construct a new paradigm that infects the core values of a group.

I had a very tough time working through my own personal experiences in an attempt to understand my leadership. Reflective practice provided me with the vehicle to reflect backwards in time in order to identify the pillars in my life that have shaped my leadership. It was challenging to look at myself and make judgments about my leadership decisions. The question that kept haunting me throughout my self analysis was “How do I as the instructional leader continue to effect change despite the culture and climate within each organization?”

What I did realize was that I am a very ambitious person who wants the best for the students I serve. Throughout my analysis I have struggled to find a balance between my professional, personal, and social life, which has been difficult. Fullan (2007) contends that “Principals are in the middle of the relationships between Teachers and students, while other school leaders are actively engaged as initiators or facilitators of continuous improvements in their schools, change is only one of the forces competing for their attention and usually not the most compelling one (pg.155).” Although it would be great to see immediate success, I realize that the harvest of change ripens with time. I have experienced what can work as evidenced through my experience at Wood Beach.

This experience has empowered me to develop and implement my school vision from my unique perspective. Through this autoethnographic research analysis I realized that I have been a visionary my whole life, but was unable to find the words to express who I am. I believe that our educational system can change. Throughout the mayhem, I was the first to accept success and failure, give credit to others, and support staff (Fullan, 2007).

## **Discussion**

When I began this autoethnographic analysis of my leadership, I was excited to positively affect the institution of education. The literature review provided a glimpse of the challenges faced by school administrators. In my research I utilized the strategy of reflective practice by Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) to further investigate my leadership. The strategies I used to collect data were observations, journals, audio recording, and critical moments that provided detailed accounts of my experiences as an alternative high school administrator. This self research study of my leadership placed me at center of my lived professional accounts. This autoethnographic analysis provided a highly reflective examination of my leadership, how I am perceived as a school leader, and how leadership impacts culture and climate. Critical reflection was the foundation for my conceptual framework throughout this autoethnographic analysis. Through the bifocal of reflective practice, I was able to analyze meaningful moments that added texture which further wove the fabric of my leadership.

This autoethnographic research analysis was a concentrated personalized account of my experiences as the self researcher and school leader in two alternative educational settings. In both educational settings I had different experiences that affected my unique leadership. The Wood Beach School District supported and valued my leadership style. I was able to develop a vision that was focused on quality instruction grounded in rigor. The Mountain View School District did allow for any deviations other than district procedures. The attitudes of the faculty in these two alternative educational settings were different in terms of organizational behavior, educational philosophy, and professional values. During my tenure at Wood Beach, the organization fostered an attitude similar to

that of a teaching hospital for medical doctors. Doctors in the medical field are paired with a veteran doctor to ensure quality practice and professional performance. For example, through my experiences I always had a supportive mentor in Dr. Harvey to help me problem solve around novel situations. My staff was committed to providing authentic educational strategies geared to the individual needs of our students. The teachers respected me as a leader and throughout the year we collaborated to develop opportunities that would best meet the needs of the students. My espoused leadership became my leadership in-use and I was able to foster a positive school culture that was challenging for students.

On the other hand, the Mountain View teachers were embedded in antiquated teaching practices that alienated an already disenfranchised student population from the learning process. I found that the rigidity of the Mountain View School District was not a congruent match for my leadership style. The lack of support made my leadership experience extremely challenging. I did not have the freedom to develop as an instructional leader. It was not possible to hire my own staff and as a result I entered into a pre-existing school climate. They demonstrated behaviors that I did not experience in prior settings. My leadership did not have the same impact in this educational setting. My efforts to develop change were sabotaged by teachers who, for one reason or another, did not value a culture that positively impacted students. I tried to change the culture, which was dysfunctional, but my attempts were met with resistance and with attacks on my leadership and integrity.

## **Limitations**

The methodology in this study was geared for leader-specific discovery in two alternative educational settings where the analysis is on site through the use of the narrative language I developed subjectively. Because every person is different, with different lived experiences, memories and interpretations, the findings of this ethnographic study is not generalizable to other school leaders. This research was conducted to understand myself, as a leader and my direct involvement as the school leader of two alternative educational settings. The choices I made as the instructional leader are subjective to my experiences. Therefore, future research, using this methodological framework may not yield consistent results. The rationale that facilitated the hiring of my staff may not be consistent in future research. Additionally, the brief amount of time spent in two alternative educational settings affected this study. I did not have enough time to learn the organizational structure because of my brief tenure in both alternative educational settings. As a result, the political climate and organizational norms of each district were not fully diagnosed.

## **Implications**

The implications of my study were far reaching. Addressing the needs of disenfranchised students starts with a district wide commitment. A student's desire to learn is directly related to the teacher's perception of the students he or she teaches (Sergiovanni, 1994). I conducted my study because I wanted to further explore my leadership, provide a quality education to this marginalized student population, and to give a voice to future contemporaries that may be faced with a similar leadership experiences. My study provides an opportunity for alternative secondary school

administrators to rethink their traditional leadership approach toward education and to begin to develop a new ideology of thinking. The use of reflective practice provided me with the luminosity in which to observe, rethink, and develop new innovative paradigms to change culture. This study demonstrated that leadership focused on student success may enact change when teachers and administrators share the same vision. I utilized an autoethnographic research design to document my experiences as an instructional leader. Although the educational settings were different, the student population was consistent. They were disenfranchised students who were not successful in a traditional educational environment. This study provided insight into the way leadership is implemented in order to affect change. This study has implications for school leaders striving to learn ways to develop a multidimensional pedagogical strategy through the use of reflective practice.

I observed authentic and antiquated instructional strategies that piqued student interest and disengaged them from the learning process. Another implication of my study highlights the need for district wide support that invested in the vision of the instructional leader. Leadership without the support from the district will not allow for meaningful changes to take place. A further implication for my study addressed the difference in ethnicity as a school leader. My presence as an African American male school leader had an effect on my leadership experience. The struggles that I endured went well beyond the boundaries of school leadership. As I reflect on this unforeseen circumstance, I wondered how the teachers at Mountain View felt about the minority students. If they did not respect me as their supervisor how were they going to develop relationships with students of color?



## **Recommendations**

My findings are twofold. First, I found that autoethnography is a valid methodology for me to learn about school leadership in two alternative educational settings. This form of self-study research provides the opportunity for the researcher to examine himself and the forces that help shape him in a given context. It is my hope that the readers arrive at the same realization. Second, through my experiences I have embraced autoethnography as a valid methodology with which to research school leadership. I would be interested in learning about autoethnographical works in the area of alternative school leadership that address the role of alternative school principals in multiple environments. This research has not only provided a deeper understanding of my own experience, but I hope it provides value for this form of qualitative research as a methodology that captures robust details in one's lived experience.

## **Conclusion**

This autoethnographic research study should prove useful for future colleagues leading in alternative educational settings. The challenges I have faced as result of this experience offers insight into my personalized research experience as an alternative high school administrator. The use of a qualitative research method assisted in analyzing my leadership for multiple vantage points which shaped me professionally. I have learned through this study that my leadership can work if given the proper school climate. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to use my leadership as an agent for change, growth, and student development. I used the theoretical leadership framework of transactional, transformational, servant, and social justice leadership to construct my own leadership path. I was able to explain my story from a highly personalized perspective.

The process of delving into one's self is extremely difficult but most productive. My personalized leadership experiences unveiled the highly political arena of public school education. While I experienced both success and failure, I was always focused on how I could deepen understanding about strategies that foster change. This self study monopolized a large amount of my time throughout the frame of reflective practice. The challenge for me was placing every critical moment into perspective. I have learned to develop perspective as an instrument to ground my focus and to continually strive to positively affect culture, teacher student interactions, and change through the lens of my leadership.

### **Epilogue**

Currently I am doing well and accepted a position in a non-profit organization dedicated to changing the lives of urban teenagers. I am happy, but most importantly I have the opportunity to effect change that is sustainable. I am the Education Coordinator for a youth development program focusing on intrinsic change that resonates outward through service for others, community respect, and educational development. The program does tremendous work and I feel like I have found my home. Through my leadership I am cognizant that some issues in our society cannot be ignored. As a result of my experiences in two different alternative educational settings I continue to try to foster a meaningful culture that is truly dedicated to changing the quality of education.

I have learned that the espoused theories that are embraced in education fall prey to political agendas, budget appropriations and expenditures. I am a part of an organization that is grounded in student centered philosophy. The journey was a valuable experience and it has focused my attention on change that is significant to the student,

teachers, and the community. I have learned that working without a purpose does not motivate me as a leader. My leadership style has been shaped to encourage young struggling students to meet their full potential. I am proud to say that I am an advocate of the non-traditional student. If I can leave this world in a better place, then my work has been meaningful.

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