

To whom it may concern:

by

Steven K. Yeoman

B.S., Washburn University, 2000

M.S., Washburn University, 2006

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Curriculum & Instruction  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2020

## **Abstract**

There is no shortage of literature on the subject of reform in education. Much has been written too about the work of the principal, particularly as it relates to school improvement, the establishment of a strong school culture, and their relationship with teachers. If there is a gap in the literature, it is hearing the voice of those charged with carrying out this important work. Borrowing from Ronai's (1995) "layered account" autoethnographic approach, this research endeavors to provide voice to the important work of the building principal. Specific attention will be paid to the establishment of a working school partnership (Knight, 2011) and how trust in schools remains a critical pursuit for any educational undertaking. Social capital theory provides the foundation and context for the research study.

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Approved by  
Major Professor  
Dr. Kay Ann Taylor

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There is no shortage of literature on the subject of reform in education. Much has been written too about the work of the principal, particularly as it relates to school improvement, the establishment of a strong school culture, and their relationship with teachers. If there is a gap in the literature, it is hearing the voice of those charged with carrying out this important work. Borrowing from Ronai's (1995) "layered account" autoethnographic approach, this research endeavors to provide voice to the important work of the building principal. Specific attention will be paid to the establishment of a working school partnership (Knight, 2011) and how trust in schools remains a critical pursuit for any educational undertaking. Social capital theory provides the foundation and context for the research study.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to thank several individuals without whom this effort would not be possible.

To Dr. Taylor, thank you for your relentlessness and unwavering support of this work. It would have been easy to quit on me, and I certainly gave you ample reason to, but you never did.

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To Courtney, Kennedy, and Elliot for believing in me and for the years of flexibility, patience and encouragement.

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To Pamela for inspiration and the necessary final push.



## Chapter 1 - Introduction

*“We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” –Anais Nin*

*The school library is humming with end of the day chatter—teachers sharing stories about their day, discussions of student behavior, funny anecdotes about the daily grind. The staff meeting is set to start. As is typically the case, the staff is sitting in grade level teams. I suspect there is comfort in patterns of behavior like these. As is true for many, educators take solace in predictability, unconscious routine. I’ve reviewed the agenda and all looks in order. We’ve met as a leadership team multiple times in the weeks prior to review the feedback and survey data from the staff. It’s time to review our three building “targets”(Knight, 2011, p. 64), formative assessment, student engagement, and differentiation, as we make plans for the upcoming school year.*

*“Hey, folks. Let’s go ahead and get started,” I say. It always takes a few seconds to get people quieted down and ready. I think often about the hypocrisy in teacher behavior—the very things they lament about student behavior are the behaviors they often unwittingly display themselves.*

*The method of getting staff input to help drive the building’s professional development effort is one that I’ve used in all of my four settings as a building principal. Jim Knight (2011) says, “Students will not be energized, thrilled, and empowered by learning until educators are energized, thrilled, and empowered by learning” (p. 6). I’ve found this statement to be absolutely true, and it’s why I’ve turned so many times to Knight’s (2011) work (Block, 1993; Collins, 2001; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Fullan, 2008, 2011; Killion & Roy, 2009; Lencioni, 2002; Palmer, 2007;; Schon, 1983; Senge, 2006; Shein, 2009) on Impact Schools when trying to build a positive school culture and engage teachers in the school*

*improvement process. We begin with an initial activity that asks staff to review the three targets we voted on: formative assessment, student engagement, and differentiation.*

*The Impact School process, as Knight (2011) outlines, calls for us to form a building leadership team, which is constructed such that each grade level has representation and a voice on the team. Despite some principal colleagues disagreeing with the practice, arguing it is better to hand-pick the team, ensuring the right staff are chosen, I've found it best to allow the staff to select who they want to represent them on the leadership team. This eliminates any misconceptions about the purpose of the team or my intentions for its members. We then conducted a needs assessment to review the existing building school improvement goals and gauge how those fit with current building needs, situated against the larger goals and initiatives of the district.*

*We have spent the past few semesters fine-tuning both the language of the goals—Knight (2011) refers to them as “targets” (p. 64)—and the manner in which we will measure our progress toward implementation. As a leadership team, the intent is to revisit these targets and gather input from staff to see how and in what ways we can best tailor our precious professional development time together toward work on these important areas of concentration.*

*“I think we need to revisit the student engagement goal,” says one staff member. “It seems to me that we’ve found the differentiation target tries to address and measure the same thing. Why then the two separate goals?”*

*“I think we really haven’t talked enough about engagement,” another staff member counters. “While we have read articles and the coach has collected some data for us, have we really worked hard to measure our progress? What about feedback from students? How are we*

*really gauging improvement on student engagement, if we aren't asking the kids if they are enjoying our class more?"*

*The leadership team is facilitating the meeting. I've positioned myself off to the side, observing how staff are engaged in the discussion—who's asking questions, what sorts of questions they are asking, etc. I can say that while I am not always one hundred percent in line with what the staff is offering in meetings like these, I am very pleased with the progress we've made as a staff in building the culture that allows for open discussion like this. When I first joined this team, this wouldn't have happened. Not only would I have been the "sage on the stage" delivering professional development from a PowerPoint, most likely, I would have had no real understanding of how the information was being received. I would not have been able to observe teacher engagement in the process, nor would I have known if the information being conveyed was meeting the individual needs of the people it was most impacting: the classroom teachers.*

When leaders and policy makers come face to face with the challenges that exist in American schools, many are tempted to propose and promote draconian methods designed to force teachers to learn new programs and hold teachers accountable for implementing them. Driven by their noble, passionate desire to improve children's lives, people talk tough about school reform . . . However, I fear that the strategy of telling teachers what to do and making sure they do often by punitive measures is one of the reasons why schools do not move forward. When we take the humanity out of professional learning, we ignore the complexity of any helping relationship, and we make it almost impossible for learning to occur. (Knight, 2011, pp. 6-7)

*I have been a building principal for nearly twelve years now. There exist a myriad of competing influences (existing school culture, district top-down management, pressures of the community, student need, power dynamics) that often work counter to any attempt to bolster relationships between the adults in the school. As a building principal, I have come to learn that without finding some direct means of tackling this often onerous challenge, Jim Knight (2011) is correct: any well-intended improvement initiatives are likely in peril and any uptick in student achievement is certainly in jeopardy.*

*The final step in our meeting today is an “Agreement and Commitment” meeting (Knight, 2011, p. 70). The process asks the leadership team to give all staff Post-it® notes on which they will write a number 1-10. The number (10 being the highest) represents an individual’s level of agreement and also commitment to the school targets and school improvement plan. Knight (2011) recommends we view agreement and commitment as two separate things. Not only do staff need to agree that the targets are what they collectively have deemed of highest priority, they also need to commit to what it means for their work and personal professional development efforts.*

Guiding the development of the target is one of the most nuanced challenges facing an instructional leader. If teachers are going to commit to the target, they must play an active role in its development . . . People want to be involved in the thinking that leads to initiatives, and they are likely to embrace goals that they help create. However, many teachers do not fully understand how they go about doing their work. Often, we are not the best judges of what we need, simply because we are inside the work, not watching from the outside. Thus, the complexity. (Knight, 2011, p. 65)

*The leadership team collects the sticky notes and we place them on an easel under the two headings “Agreement” and “Commitment.” Given the process is completely anonymous, I am confident I have a true representation of how the staff feel about our work today. While the greater majority of the sticky notes range from 8s, 9s, and 10s, there are a few outliers, two 6s and even a 4.*

*“I see that there are some of you who may not altogether agree or are committed to what we’ve discussed here today,” I say. “Remember, that’s part of the process, so I’m pleased that you’re being honest about your feelings. Would the staff who wrote those lower numbers like an opportunity to explain your thinking while we’re all gathered together?”*

*Silence.*

*I wait a few more seconds. “Okay, well, please know that your voice is important. If that’s you, and you’d like to find an opportunity to discuss with me further your feelings about the target plan, please do so. Or talk to a member of the leadership team, if that’s more comfortable for you.”*

*While it’s encouraging that someone felt comfortable voicing their dissent with a “4,” the fact those individuals didn’t speak up suggests I have yet to create a safe-space to have open, constructive dialogue. I still have work to do.*

*We adjourn the meeting as scheduled. I thank each member of the leadership team for their help with the meeting, knowing it’s often difficult to be in front of peers in a teacher-leadership capacity. Staff file out, wishing one another well. Overall, I’d say it was a very effective use of our time together.*

Essentially, this research is at least nine years in the making, for it was nine years ago when I first heard of Jim Knight's (2011) Impact Schools school improvement model. I was an elementary principal in a former district and recognized a deficiency in our building school culture and wanted to return agency to the professionals with whom I worked. The school, West Rochester Elementary, was a school of approximately 375 students. The school was located in a relatively affluent part of the district and the staff was comprised of a mix of veteran teachers (20 + years of experience) and several new to the classroom. I had assumed the role of principal at West Rochester, following my predecessor who was at West for nearly twenty years. The district was under new central office leadership and they were looking to adopt a more comprehensive school improvement model to bolster our student achievement, which had been uncharacteristically down.

Early in my tenure as a principal at West, my school district was looking to adopt a new school improvement process designed by the state called Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Though not mandated, this still widely accepted "Response to Intervention (or RtI)" model asked educators to use some form of progress monitoring and assessment to better identify student skill deficits in reading and math. In part, teachers would be asked to administer these assessments and place students in intervention groups to address the identified skills. Our school improvement goals were largely then decided for us, as were the benchmarks toward their implementation. Upon learning that this would be happening, several staff members openly expressed their concern and reluctance to adopt this new way of doing business. Likewise, as building principal, I had some serious reservations that this was the right approach to our work. In a MTSS model, I/we believed too much is regimented, scripted, and standardized. There was little room for professional thought or negotiation with content.

The Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) process, on the other hand, was intriguing to me because it seemed to address what I had found to be conspicuously absent in my professional work with teachers and with school improvement, in general. Jim Knight (2011), in his book *Unmistakable Impact*, outlines a process, built on theory that attempts to return agency to the professionals in the school. He offers the following:

Professional learning fails when change leaders underestimate how complicated change can be. Just telling people what to do and expecting them to do it might work for simple tasks . . . but such an approach is seldom motivating or effective for professionals. In education, effective professional learning must be grounded in an understanding of how complex helping relationships can be. Failing to understand the nature of helping relationships can doom leaders of change. (p. 20)

The process seeks to employ partnership created by work shaped through “equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity” (Knight, 2011, p. 20). These “partnership principles” (Knight, 2011) serve as the foundation of the process and are what compelled me to adopt it as our form of school improvement instead of the more popular MTSS. Concurrent with my introduction to the Impact Schools model, I had begun work on my doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction. My doctoral studies had introduced me to many ideas and theories that shaped my perspective on teaching and learning, leadership, and school improvement. I was finding that though these ideas often resonated with those around me, they rarely led to action or any real change at the school level. Consequently, I found myself struggling regularly with that philosophical intersection between theory and practice.

My proposal, at that time, to the district level administrators to move forward with Impact Schools was met with skepticism, but I was given passive permission to go my own way, with

the understanding that all I would be given was permission, not direct support in the form of training or resources as were given to the schools adopting MTSS. As a staff we then worked hard to implement the Impact Schools process and I was pleased with the momentum we had started.

Throughout our implementation of Impact Schools at West, I saw some great gains with culture and collaboration. We all read portions of the *Unmistakable Impact* (Knight, 2011) text and discussed our roles. We conducted a needs assessment, settled on Targets, formed a building leadership team, and allowed instructional coaching (an integral component to Knight's (2011) process) to take on a much more significant role.

Two years later, the assistant superintendent in another district approached me. He explained that his district had adopted Impact Schools as their district-wide improvement model. Recognizing how vital district level support is to any improvement process, and eager to work in a district that purported to be adopting principles that would shape a professional culture in which I wanted to work, I heavy-heartedly abandoned my post in the school in which I worked, and the efforts we had started there, and moved to a new building and new district.

My tenure as principal in the new district started four years into their implementation of Impact Schools. I was assigned to David Anthony Elementary. David was a Title I school, with a student demographic that was low-income and very diverse. There were approximately 350 students, and the staff was made up of a healthy mixture of staff new to David and several who had been there many years. I was the third principal in as many years and the district was under relatively new leadership. It was all very exciting and seemingly held a great deal of promise. I was coming in expecting to see the process well under way and was surprised by what I found. The culture, the professional discourse, the apparent prioritization of certain things . . .



none of it echoed the Impact School partnership principles. This led me to want to dig into the context in which I found myself.

Given the apparent lack of connectedness between teachers and district level staff at David, I wanted to explore what foundation had been laid when entering into the process. I wanted to know what influences were keeping this process from being realized. I wanted to know how leadership was functioning in connection with creating a partnership approach. I wanted to know how teachers perceived the process and whether they felt better about their work as a result. And, I wanted to know where my newfound leadership role was situated within this context.

As part of my early doctoral studies work, and in a deliberate effort to implement the Impact Schools approach at my new school, I interviewed teachers and a district level administrator as part of an action research study. The results led me to realize that while Impact Schools has the blueprint to enhanced school improvement, many other important factors such as trust, competing priorities, top-down decision-making, existing school culture, and leadership heavily influence the collective ability to do Impact Schools well.

Fast forward, and I am again in a new school, a new district. Many of the component parts are the same: I inherited a culture already in motion, there is new district leadership interested in broad-scale change, and I am working to involve teachers in the process of school improvement. My new school, Broadmoor Elementary, is located in a very affluent part of the city. I inherited my post succeeding a principal who had been at Broadmoor for 25 years. The staff, when I arrived, was largely veteran, with many having been at Broadmoor for over twenty years. The building student population hovers around 500, with most of the students coming from two-parent, professional families. As an experienced principal, I was well-aware of the

scrutiny I would experience initially. I knew that there would be excitement about the potential of new leadership but was not naive to the fact staff would approach any of my new ideas with a degree of trepidation. I would need to establish trust and I felt the best way to do this was to share my experiences with Impact Schools, discuss the potential I felt it had to return agency to their work, and be patient to allow the process to take root.

With increased accountability standards and demands placed on schools and educators, effective school leadership has never been more critically important (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2014; Knight, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2010). As school leaders, it is imperative we understand the current landscape in which we are situated. We must know the influences that impact our work and recognize that, if not navigated effectively, these influences can either enhance or diminish school improvement efforts.

In today's education age, there seems to be little that isn't subject to extraordinary exploration and scrutiny: How do students learn best? What constitutes an effective classroom? What is the role of technology in today's model of instruction? What is the responsibility of the classroom teacher to meet the needs of the so-called 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner? Should schools be reorganized altogether? Should reform take place from the top-down or the bottom-up? Accepting that change in education is inevitable, it is incumbent on building leaders to understand the dynamics that influence their work in pursuing any change initiative.

Seemingly every aspect of our educational system—how it is governed, the basic organization of schools, who teaches, how students are educated, what's being taught, and how we know what students are actually learning—are all subject to intense scrutiny and revision. (Bryk & Schneider, E-book version, chapter 1, paragraph 1, 2002)

School principals then are tasked with trying to navigate these formidable educational waters and help provide a healthy school climate in which student learning thrives, staff learning communities feel connected, and teachers feel a part of something meaningful.

As a practicing building principal of over twelve years, it has been my continued aim to build trust and partnership with the teachers with whom I have had the good fortune to work and involve them in the efforts to improve our school. In my twelve years, I have worked through many attempts at broad-scale school improvement. I have attended trainings and worked to implement initiatives, some of my own creation, some as a product of requirements placed on me in whichever professional setting I worked, all with the aim of improving school culture and student achievement. I've worked in settings where the resources were scarce and others where they were abundant. Every attempt, no matter how well-intentioned, designed, and coordinated, all seem to have ultimately fallen short of my desired expectation. Why?

Educational researchers Bryk, Gomez, Grunow and Lemahieu (2015), to draw together a set of ruminations, offers the following on how we as educational systems continue to misdiagnose what ails us in schools:

Operating here is a well-known organizational phenomenon called *attribution error*.

When we see unsatisfactory results, we tend to blame the individuals most immediately connected to those results, not recognizing the full causes. The evidence from over a half century of effort across numerous sectors and industries is clear: improving productivity in complex systems is not principally about incentivizing more individual effort, preaching about better intentions, or even enhancing individual competence. Rather, it is about designing better processes for carrying out common work problems and creating

more agile mechanisms for sensing and reacting to novel situations. (Kindle Edition, location 1127)

The elements of Knight's (2011) Impact Schools approach seem to hold so much promise and address many of the hurdles principals and school leaders may experience in their efforts to improve student achievement. Why hasn't Knight's (2011) Partnership Approach, then, or at least the tenets it espouses, found more traction in schools?

Drawing on the doctrines of social capital theory (Bourdieu, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Gauntlett, 2018; Putnam, 2000; Siisiainen, 2000, Swartz, 1997), with particular consideration of trust as a professional, and system consideration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995; Kochanek, 2005; Seligman, 1997; Tschannen-Moran, 2014), this research seeks to understand better the school improvement process as a sociological endeavor. Principals and teachers must establish professional relationships that allow for transparency, collaboration, space to ask tough questions, challenge the status quo, and work toward a common end. There exists a social contract inherent in the dynamic between a principal and the teachers with whom they work. I ask them to "follow me" and I, in turn, trust that when they are engaged with their work with students, that the commitments we've made, the covenant we've collectively created, is honored and put in to practice. Additionally, social capital theory can help in providing some explanation and account for how staff as actors behave within the school setting.

Social capital definitions vary somewhat depending on who one reads. Coleman (1988), for example, asserts:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate

actors—within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. (p. 98)

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (in Swartz, 1997) writes to social capital theory, largely from an economic perspective, as a means of explaining the ways in which society is reproduced. His is a focus on how dominant classes within society tend to use capital to retain their status (Gauntlett, 2018). Bourdieu (1986) writes,

The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. (p. 242)

To Bourdieu (1986) social capital is largely institutional, driven by the necessity to produce and reproduce relationship for material or symbolic advantage.

In other words, the network of relationship is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term, i.e., at transforming contingent relations, such as those of neighborhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.) or institutionally guaranteed (rights)...The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. (pp. 246-247)

In his evaluation, Swartz (1997) defines the Bourdieu perspective on social capital theory thus:

The focus of his work, therefore, is on how cultural socialization places individuals and groups within competitive status hierarchies, how relatively autonomous fields of conflict interlock individuals and groups in struggle over valued resources, how these social struggles are refracted through symbolic classifications, how actors struggle and pursue strategies to achieve their interests within such fields, and how in doing so actors unwittingly reproduce the social stratification order. Culture, then, is not devoid of political content but rather is an expression of it. (p. 7)

In his work, *Bowling Alone* (2000), sociologist Robert Putnam operates from a slightly different perspective on social capital:

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals— social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue.’ The difference is that ‘social capital’ calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital. (p. 19)

If schools are social networks, then aspects of social capital theory can provide the foundation for this study. Putnam’s (2000) broader discussion of society can be applied easily to life in a school. He writes,

A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that money is more efficient than barter. If we don’t have to balance every exchange instantly, we can get a lot more accomplished. Trustworthiness lubricates social life. (p. 21)

Applying the tenets of social capital theory, then, may provide a framework by which my data collection, literature review, and narrative stories included in this research effort are analyzed and interpreted.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

*The evidence is persuasive. The challenge is real. The need for some leaders to step forward and take the necessary risks to build positive school cultures has never been greater. (Deal & Peterson, 2009, p. 16)*

As a practicing school principal, I can personally attest to the challenge of operating in a system with high expectations and even higher accountability measures. Combined influences and pressures from the school district, parents, teachers, and the larger school community can heavily impact a school's climate and culture. These pressures and competing interests take their toll on teachers and administrators who are trying to work together on behalf of students and student achievement.

Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) asserts:

With the exception of a few states that have had enlightened long-term leadership, the United States, has failed to maintain focused investments in a stable, well-prepared teaching force; has allowed the direction of learning to be whipsawed by unproductive 'curriculum wars'; and has spent millions creating innovative schools that, although promising, remain at the margins of a system that has not been redesigned to support a 21<sup>st</sup>-century schooling enterprise. (p. 9)

If forming professional, collaborative, trusting relationships is required in order to meet the countless needs in a school setting, specific steps must be taken by the principal to address, and possibly mitigate, any factors that challenge one's ability to shape a positive school culture.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) in their relevant work, *Trust in Schools*, point to two competing approaches to education reform. On the one hand, are reformers who believe the most efficient way to improve student achievement and failing schools is to “reframe the incentives and control mechanisms under which school professionals work in order to encourage the needed innovations and improvements” (p. 4). These reformers, they argue, believe the only way to truly address the challenges in today’s system is to address barriers associated with educational institutional aspects—e.g., teacher pay, decision-making protocols, school hours, assessment measures. On the other side, they stress, is a contingent who argue that a focus on so-called research-based instruction is the only means to truly improve schools. This approach is associated with a focus on higher standards and accountability measures, which “necessitates a concerted effort to improve the knowledge and skills of current teachers, better preparation for their future colleagues, and support for continued development of the teaching profession” (p. 5). In other words, they argue that investing in the human capital aspect of schooling is the best way to move systems forward.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) assert:

Both perspectives have merit. Embedded in the current governance arrangements for public education are disincentives and constraints that seriously impede desired improvement ... Equally correct, however, are those focused on enhancing teacher competence, who remind us that the classroom—where teachers encounter students around subject matter—is the primary context for instruction. If we wish to substantially improve student learning, we must transform the intellectual dynamics of the classroom. (p. 5)



While each of these policy approaches have potential, research (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & Lemahieu, 2015; Bryk, Gomez & Grunow, 2011; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2011; Knight, 2011) and this researcher believe these summations are incomplete and inadequate. If we are going to address the challenges in schooling today, we need to focus our attention on what factors continually seem to impede the process of school improvement and the establishment of a productive, mindful school culture.

Edgar Schein (2009), an organizational psychologist, compellingly reiterates the case for leadership decision-making focused on developing a strong school culture: “There is a possibility underemphasized in leadership research, that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to work with culture” (p. 2). Are there existing school dynamics that continue to keep administrators and teachers isolated from one another? Bryk and Schneider (2002) call this a “distinct power asymmetry” (p. 48). While the work of teachers and administrators should operate in concert, it is often the case that communication is strained, misunderstandings persist, trust erodes, and there endures a gap in the understanding of the similarities and differences of the work between these two groups.

The research suggests school improvement efforts should not only be more narrow in focus, identifying key areas for improvement, but should also involve intentionally and deliberately classroom teachers, who will ultimately be instrumental in carrying out any change initiative (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & Lamahieu, 2015; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Gomez & Grunow, 2011; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2011; Knight, 2011). Using autoethnography as a research methodology I seek to understand the impact of

specific school improvement efforts that help engender and sustain teacher voice, self-efficacy, and input.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Ravitch (2010) states, “We have known for many years that we need to improve our schools. We keep stumbling, however, because there is widespread disagreement about what should be improved, what we mean by improvement, and who should do it” (p. 223). As there exist competing perspectives regarding how best to improve schools, it is the purpose of this research to explore further what factors influence the improvement of my school culture and the relationships between the professionals who work within it. This study then intends to discover and better understand these factors that contribute to the presence or absence of a productive and efficacious school culture in my school, and what I, as a practicing administrator, may have in my control to effectively, positively influence outcomes. With regard to trust and the specific topic of teacher retention, for example, Lytle Trace (2016) offers, “Teacher demographics, salary, and personal reasons are beyond the control of administrators. Thus, looking further into administrators’ dispositions and their relationship to teacher job satisfaction is a step in identifying how administrators can be proactive in teacher retention” (p. 5).

There is also research to suggest that ailing cultures may be a result of schools succumbing to issues related to threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). The idea of threat rigidity creates further context for the purpose of this study. Understanding, for example, how schools as organizations respond, in some cases, maladaptively, to pressures associated with maintaining the status quo, top-down performance expectation, power relationships, etc. Olsen and Sexton (2009) suggest threat rigidity results in symptoms of cultural decline:

Psychological stress emerges and so limits the cognitive ability of organization members to discriminate unfamiliar stimuli and think flexibly or innovatively. Groups within the organization quarrel over power, resources, and support for their solutions to the threat. The group that prevails (often temporarily) increases its intragroup relations; overall, however, intergroup ties lessen, and the losing group suffers a marked decrease in intragroup cohesiveness. Conformity, efficiency, and standardization measures decrease individuals' perceptions of their value to the organization. (p. 15)

The subsequent research questions and study will take into account the larger school system context, the school culture I personally work within, and existing research about leadership practices that may have influence on this area of study. I approach this research believing a concentration on this aspect of improvement represents a critical area of focus for practicing and future school principals, district-level leadership, teachers, the larger school community, and future research efforts. Approaches such as Knight's (2011) Impact Schools, for example, and, in particular, as seen by me as a researcher and principal, have tremendous potential and should be examined and explored in greater detail. As Fullan (2014) reminds us, "A wrong culture will absorb well-meaning individuals faster than we can produce them" (p. 32).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions have guided my study and will continue to inform my work as a practicing administrator:

1. What is the potential of models like Impact Schools for school improvement in my school as outlined by Knight (2011)? What are the barriers that inhibit implementation?

2. What is the difference between partnership (Knight, 2011) as described in the literature and my lived experience as a practicing building principal?
3. Where does trust exist as a key component to the larger social endeavor of school improvement and culture building in my school?

## **Methodology**

Following significant deliberation, I have elected to use autoethnography as my primary research methodology. As this is a qualitative research study, the use of narrative methods is of particular benefit. Richardson (1994) argues for writing as a “method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic.” (p. 516)

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. (Richardson, 1994, p. 516)

This research is also an act of self-discovery, in a sense. It is self-serving, but only in that I want to be a more effective school leader. This research is not only seeking to inform the larger conversation about leadership and culture-building in schools, it has practical implications for my current work as a principal. I am at once learning about my topic of study and about myself.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offer, “People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others” (p. xxvi). It is my intent to use lived stories from my life as a principal and principal-researcher to interrogate my reality and questions about leadership, work within school settings, school improvement, and social contexts of schooling. As Kim (2016) says, “We

become other than what we have been by interrogating ourselves. Hence, we are, in a sense, always in the way of becoming” (p. 31).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to Geertz (1988) and the metaphor of a parade. There is a tentative quality to our research, he says, “We know what we know because of how we are positioned. If we shift our position in the parade, our knowing shifts” (p. 17). This idea is further identified in Bourke’s (2014) work, which states, “Through this voice, the researcher leaves her or his own signature on the project, resulting from using the self as the research instrument and her or his subjectivity” (p. 2). My signature then, will be my narrative accounts of my life as a building principal, woven throughout this research, that when sewn together, reveal a picture of what life as a principal may be like, and further, deconstruct the challenges inherent in the position that influence school improvement efforts and aims.

Specifically, I am approaching this autoethnographic effort borrowing from Ronai’s (1995) layered account technique. In defense and description of the layered account, she writes, “The layered account is a narrative form designed to loosely represent to, as well as produce for, the reader, a continuous dialectic of experience, emerging from the multitude of reflexive voices that simultaneously produce and interpret a text” (1995, p. 396).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Impact School** – Jim Knight (2011) describes an Impact School as one, “where every aspect of professional learning is designed to have an unmistakable, positive impact on teaching, and hence, student learning” (p. 37). A professional learning community that reflects an Impact School set of principles is built on the foundation of humanity, focus, leverage, simplicity, and precision (Knight, 2011).

**Layered Account** – A “layered account” (Ronai, 1995) is an ethnographic approach that allows the researcher the freedom to acknowledge “sociology as a personal reflection of the sociologist creating it” (p. 395). Therefore, the layered account approach is an interweaving of reflection, personal accounts, theoretical consideration, research, and statistics that help tell a story. (1995)

**Partnership Approach**—Knight (2011), in his argument for an Impact Schools approach to school improvement highlights the importance of partnership. Partnership is defined as principals seeing teachers as equals and working to embody the principles of equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity (p. 46).

**Relational Trust** – Bryk and Schneider (2002) use the term relational trust in the research. They define it as a, “calculation whereby an individual decides whether or not to engage in an action with another individual that incorporates some degree of risk” (p. 13). Relational trust suggests a set of core cultural and structural set of dependencies that “create feelings of vulnerability for the individuals involved” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 17).

**School Culture** -- Schein (1985, as cited in Deal & Peterson, 2009) defines school culture as “a pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems . . . that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 6).

**Social Capital** -- Putnam (2000) describes social capital as connections that exist between individuals, including, “the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (p. 19). Coleman (1988) defines social capital as, multiple

entities that consist of social structures which are “productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98).

**Threat Rigidity** – Olsen and Sexton (2009) speak to threat rigidity as an organization’s interest in maintaining its “equilibrium” through “centralizing and restricting the flow of information, by constricting control, by emphasizing routinized and simplified instructional/assessment practices, and by applying strong pressure for school personnel to conform” (p. 14).

**Trust** – The focus of this research is not to define trust, necessarily, so we will use Tschannen-Moran’s (2014) definition from *Trust Matters*. According to Tschannen-Moran (2014), “Trust is one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent (Mishra, 1996; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, 2000, in Tschannen-Moran 2014, p. 19).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

It is important to address the delimitations and limitations of this study. There are indeed factors, contexts, and other circumstances that will undoubtedly influence my research. The subjectivity of this qualitative study both limits and enhances the study itself. My position as principal, for example, brings with it a power dynamic that cannot be overlooked and left unacknowledged. However, it is the very nature of this role and the power dynamic itself, particularly as it relates to school culture, school improvement, and trust, that I wish to explore further.

My belief system and prejudices associated with cumulative years of experience as a practicing building administrator and my work in multiple, diverse contexts, likely also influence the ways in which I may interpret data collected. I am, at this point, only acknowledging their

presence. It is likely, in fact, expected, that additional beliefs and prejudices may emerge as I reflect on my topic of inquiry. Likewise, the data collected delimits the research and is certainly bound to reflect the current culture that exists in the school system in which I work. I am only able to examine the culture as it currently exists, or at least as I perceive it to be, or as the way the evidence influences my interpretation. What could be factored in, perhaps, as is the case with many systems and organizations, is what the culture was like when I inherited it. As each system and culture are unique, data collected will likely reflect, to a degree, the current beliefs and perspectives held by the individuals working within my particular setting at this particular point in time.

There too may be factors that I fail to explore with the necessary degree of thoroughness, that may be of significance, but are not the primary focus of this research. Throughout the research, it will be important to acknowledge these, but resist the pull to stretch this research into too many competing areas of focus, thus limiting the concentration on one particularly important aspect of study.

What potential noxious effects exist should this research become too confessional? Being mindful that I am a practicing school administrator, one who represents a school community, a school district, and a position that is public and therefore held to a different standard, I recognize that this position shapes my interest in and willingness to share anything that would possibly harm others or my reputation.

### **Significance of the Study**

Each year, every school in the United States formally or informally identifies something it will work on to maintain or (ideally) to improve student achievement. Many of these decisions become evident as school improvement plans. Harvard scholar Richard Elmore contends that the



selection a school makes within these improvement plans is a critical factor in the school's ability to improve student achievement” (Marzano, Waters, McNulty, 2005, Kindle Edition, location 1359). Organizations are continually looking to find ways to increase productivity and improve results. Schools are no exception. Likewise, school administrators are constantly seeking ways to improve school cultures and create the environments for teachers and students to best find success.

There are positive consequences as a result of an investment in trust and relationship-building between teachers and principals and involving them in the process of learning and school renewal. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify four opportunities created for schools when administrators concentrate efforts on building strong relational trust with teachers. First, schools with greater relational trust are better able to meet the demands of external scrutiny and top-down reform efforts. Second, schools are more likely to see progress with reform and innovation, because with trust school stakeholders are more likely to come together and work collectively on items requiring action. Third, relational trust helps individuals understand and respect the roles within an organization allowing all to be more efficient with their work and supportive of one another. And fourth, schools with high relational trust are more likely to operate with a moral imperative on behalf of children. As benefits for this investment exist for administrators, teachers, students, and even parents, examining and understanding the factors that inhibit an organization’s ability to increase relational trust should be identified.

Specifically, the work of Knight’s (2011) Impact Schools approach to school improvement and partnership offers promise for educators seeking to increase levels of teacher involvement in their school.

Impact Schools demand that everyone works together to create a new kind of school culture, one based on partnership rather than top-down directives, a culture based on love more than bullying and fear. Impact Schools start from the default assumption that teachers are smart, good people who more than anything else want to help their students succeed. (Knight, 2011, p. 240)

As schools seek to find ways to improve student achievement, improve cultures, and increase results, identifying models of school improvement that can best create the landscape necessary for this to happen should be researched and that research shared with other practitioners.

Elmore (YEAR) points out that the school reform effort in the United States is plagued by falsehoods, one of which is that schools fail because teachers and administrators don't work hard enough: These falsehoods include believing that schools fail because the people in them—administrators, teachers, and students—don't work hard enough and that they are lazy, unmotivated, and self-serving. For Elmore, the downfall of low-performing schools is not their lack of effort and motivation; rather, it is poor decisions regarding what to work on (Marzano, et al., 2005 Kindle Edition, location 1360).

Ultimately, then this is a study that serves the purpose of self-exploration, with the intent of improving my efficacy as a practicing building principal. Simultaneously, this research study can assist other educators as they navigate the oft precarious, challenging, and muddy terrain of school improvement.

### **Researcher Positionality**

On the topic of positionality, Bourke (2014) reminds researchers,

The nature of qualitative research sets the researcher as the data collection instrument. It is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background

(gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process. (p. 2)

I enter into this research fully recognizing my own positionality as a male principal with twelve years of leadership experience. I know my experiences in four different school districts, and the experience of my current school and the relationships I have with those with whom I currently work, will both enhance and limit my ability to interpret any data collected throughout this research. Indeed, as Bourke (2014) acknowledges,

Our own biases shape the research process, serving as checkpoints along the way.

Through recognition of our biases, we presume to gain insights into how we might approach a research setting, members of particular groups, and how we might seek to engage with participants. (p. 1)

I also enter into the research having already formed the opinion that Impact Schools and the partnership approach (Knight, 2011) is a great example of a school improvement model to provide leadership in a school. Given this presumption, I may unwittingly structure my research questions or gather data based on this belief system. I believe many refer to this as confirmation bias. Acknowledging my positionality does not suggest limits to the study or my capacity as a researcher. Instead, it simply accepts that context is relevant, in fact, critically important to my study. I am a relatively confident, experienced school administrator, but as a researcher, I remain in probationary status. However, here I lean on Richardson (1994) who instills me with confidence, encouraging others like me, by offering, “But a postmodernist position does allow us to know ‘some- thing’ without claiming to know everything. Having a partial, local, historical knowledge is still knowing” (p. 518).

## Organization of the Study

Chapter One of the study contains the introduction, the purpose of the study, research questions, methodology, definition of terms, limitations and delimitations, significance of the study, research positionality, and organization of the study. Chapter Two is the review of literature. Discussion of narrative inquiry and autoethnography as a research methodology comprises the majority of Chapter Three.

While all events and narratives come from actual ones in my principal story, the names of individuals, places, and specific locations, are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of those included in the research.

*When I first inherited my current school office I was taken aback at how stuffy it felt. The furniture was unapologetically dated, appropriated, I'm assuming, from a large, sterile office building. One set of many in a battalion of cubicles. Not the most warm or inviting environment resulted. I have since added a little personal touch to the place. While the wood doesn't match, it's at least a visible, earnest attempt at an update: one desk, a three-tiered bookshelf, a credenza, pictures of my family, some K-State memorabilia. I've also purchased four chairs and a large ottoman to place in the center, creating a little seating area to meet. It's around the ottoman where I regularly sit, cup of coffee in hand, and discuss all-things Broadmoor in my weekly meeting with the building instructional coach.*

*"So, what are the look-fors you think we should add for this round of classroom visits?" She, Laura, the instructional coach, asks this of me. She's a fantastic coach—hardworking, unflappably honest, creative, techy, full of verve. In so many ways, she's a great complement to my style of leadership. A yin to my yang.*

*Conducting classroom visits should be a regular practice of a school instructional coach, however, we've had some difficulty getting this venture going at our school. We've read articles about the value of feedback and data collection, had a few speakers in to discuss during staff meetings, and waited a long time for the temperature of the building to be ready. Laura has been ready. She has been patient, more so with me than the staff. While her energy and intentions are noble, only wishing to be of value and support to her colleagues, it's evident from conversations I've had both as an entire staff and as individuals that many still aren't altogether trusting of her motives. As a result, I've asked Laura to trust me, help me set the stage, and work deliberately to increase the level of knowledge with the teachers with whom we work, prior to asking them to open their doors to us.*

*"Well, our targets are around engagement and formative assessment, right?" I reply. "We need this observation data to help inform some professional development decisions we need to make. How are we supposed to know our level of effectiveness with any of our targets, if we are unwilling to examine our current reality?"*

*"I agree. I have this form from the Knight material. Should we use it?"*

*The form is a simplistic one. The observer just monitors on-task behavior versus off task behavior. Students who are observed following teacher directions, participating appropriately, etc., are counted as on-task, and those who seem disengaged are counted as off-task. The observer then just provides the teacher with the time and length of the visit and a percentage of students who appear to be on-task. It's perhaps not the best tool available, but it's a good start.*

*"And we are still in agreement, participation in your feedback opportunities are optional, and I don't see the data collected? You'll just complete the form, leave it on the desk with a nice note, or something," I say. We've discussed this at length. While it is not only my prerogative,*

*arguably my responsibility, to give regular feedback to staff, Laura and I have discussed the merit of making the coach an option for staff, first, allowing her to do the visit, collect the data, and share it only with the teacher. The function, therefore, is to show staff the purpose is feedback toward improvement, not evaluation.*

*“Yes,” she replies. “That’s still my plan. I sent an email to everyone with a sign-up form. So far, I have a pretty good turnout. I think we should be excited about how many more we have than last year, or the year prior. Still have a few who’ve not responded. I’m sure you can guess who.”*

*“I’m sure I can.” This I offer, with a sardonic smile, without acknowledgement of who we are likely both referring to. While I’m certainly pleased with the work accomplished on school culture improvements, there remain a handful of staff that appear to still be dubious of my change initiatives. They wear their cynicism and suspicion on their sleeve. Working with staff reluctant to change is a theme covered in virtually all leadership literature. I personally struggle with this critical component of what is asked of me. Part of me wants to, honestly, just dismiss them, not as people, of course. Just dismiss the behavior. My analogy is that sooner or later you’re going to stop asking someone to go to the movies. If they aren’t interested, that’s on them. Work on those who are engaged, wanting to be part of something bigger than themselves. I only have so much energy to give, right? Why expend it on someone that isn’t interested in reciprocating? However, inevitably, I don’t reside on that side of the fence for very long. I want to understand why teachers feel the way they do about change, administration, school improvement, and the like. What has happened in their professional (or personal) lives that has caused them to feel any new school venture has only the worst of intentions? Having said that, Unmistakable Impact and the work becoming an Impact School is predicated on this notion of*

*partnership. Partnership and trust existing as key components to school culture improvement is a precept those around me will hear often. However, as I've said aloud to the staffs with whom I've worked many times, partnership is a two-way street. I can't realistically carry the weight of the work by myself.*

*"Well, let's dig in," I say to Laura. "This is going to be a good thing. Let's stay positive, realistic, and patient. I'm convinced this is the right work and the right way to go about it. Stay the course and we'll be grateful for it."*

*"You're the boss," Laura replies, smiling.*

*Yes, I guess I am. Whatever that means.*

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

*“All conversations are with myself, and sometimes they involve other people. Each of us is a place where conversations occur.” – Susan Scott*

*The conference room is where we host most of our important school meetings, IEPs, 504 meetings, and the like. It has a dry erase board where a person can take notes for the group and a tv monitor equipped with an Apple TV, so documents, like IEPs, can be projected for all to observe during discussion. The table only seats eight comfortably, but there always seems to be too many chairs, giving the space a crowded, misconceived feel.*

*Today’s meeting is with the district’s National Education Association (NEA) rep, L.S. (initials); Debby, grade level teacher, and building NEA team member (also a member of the building leadership team); and me. As a principal with previous experience in other districts, it is my observation the relationship between our district and its professional organization is, unfortunately, less than ideal. Too much time is spent drawing lines in the sand on issues that seem too many steps removed from what should be our main priority: students.*

*A perfect example would be today’s sit-down with L.S. and Debby. In my twelve years of administrative experience I have never needed to have a conversation with the district’s NEA representation. I very much value the NEA’s collective purpose and feel I go out of my way to ensure I don’t inadvertently or unwittingly step on or in something contract-related. But today, the function, ostensibly, of our meeting is for me to run by these two my school improvement plans and hear from the building liaison, with the district’s NEA rep present, about anything school and staff related that would warrant my immediate attention. The district administrative cabinet has asked principals to schedule monthly meetings like this to help ensure a productive*



*and collegial relationship with NEA representation. But I'm a little more than suspect of the intentions, and honestly believe maneuvers like this do more to create divide than they do to prevent it.*

*L.S. opens the meeting. "Well, Mr. Yeoman, thank you for making the time for us and this conversation today. I know you're busy."*

*"Of course, it's important. Glad to make the time."*

*"Obviously, the main purpose of our time," L.S. says, "Is just getting a gauge on how the staff are feeling about building expectations, the culture, in general, that sort of thing. I think it's important that we have open dialogue about any issues, so we can better head them off."*

*"Hmm. Well, I guess I didn't think we really have any issues," I reply. "Not anything noteworthy, I mean. But I obviously just have my perspective. Sure, there are those on the staff who feel comfortable letting me know how they're feeling about things, periodically, and some who may not. Our leadership team, though, is designed so that it's representative, and everyone has an opportunity to voice opinions, either to me, or to their designated grade level team member."*

*"Oh, I didn't realize that," L.S. says with some degree of surprise.*

*"It's a good idea," Debby chimes in, "but, honestly, I'm not sure we truly hear from everyone."*

*"Perhaps not. But do you ever? At least ours is an earnest attempt. Our entire school improvement platform is based on partnership." This I reply, feeling a little defensive already. I really don't think this challenging remark would be something Debby would otherwise say to me without the safety of L.S. nearby. Though I suppose, in some sense, that's ok. If that's how she's feeling, at least she has this platform to air it.*

*“Tell me more about your partnership approach?” L.S. invites.*

*“Well, it’s based on the work of Jim Knight. He’s a researcher out of KU. It’s a school improvement model I’ve always returned to as a building principal. The idea is that teacher voice serves as a critical component of school improvement and goal setting. My perspective is important because it reflects a broader lens and I have insight into district goals. But it’s the teachers who know what goals might most impact their work and influence student achievement. So, we work in partnership. We do a needs assessment, write some goals, and then hold one another accountable. The model works if everyone is on board.”*

*“And do you think everyone is on board?” L.S. asks, looking as much to Debby as to me.*

*Debby ponders this for a moment, then says, “Well, I certainly think everyone appreciates the gesture and what Steve is trying to do. It’s honestly difficult for some, I believe, to feel that the gesture is genuine though. You know, teachers aren’t exactly accustomed to principals asking for their opinion.”*

*“Trust takes time,” I say.*

*“Yes,” Debby nods, “you’re right there. And we definitely have trust issues at our school. We have some who feel they definitely have your support and others who just aren’t sure.”*

*“And which one are you?” L.S. baits Debby.*

*I can tell where this is going. I wonder how often it’s the case in other schools that the building NEA representative is also one of the individuals most concerned with trust and who has a tepid relationship with the principal. I feel like this meeting, allegedly scheduled to be a means of building bridges, only invites criticism of my leadership. Suddenly, I feel like it’s a two-against-one, and I have to be very cautious about the words I choose. I find myself sitting*

*up a little straighter in my chair. Is mine a now more confident or defensive posture? Tough to say. It is a skill-set developed over time that allows a building principal to know which occasions require a more down-to-earth, accessible approach, and which ones push you into a more formulaic, even inanimate, response. Oddly, I often wonder if it's the former that would be better suited for all school dialogue, even if the we are conditioned to feel the latter is more appropriate.*

*Debby pauses. "Well, do you remember the time you referred to us as children and step-children? I think that hurt a lot of people's feelings."*

*L.S., eyebrows raised, turns to me. I can almost hear her quietly take the safety off her gun.*

*I clear my throat. Stay composed, Steve. "Debby, let's not take things out of context. I said that, not as a way to describe how I feel, but rather, as a way to capture the nature of staff dynamics. It's been my experience that staff who have been hired by me, just inherently have a different relationship with me than those staff who were already here when I became principal. Maybe children and step-children wasn't the best way to describe it, but it came from the right place."*

*"I can certainly understand some staff not wanting to feel like a step-child," L.S. weighs in. "It's just the wrong connotation."*

*"Wait." They have my full attention. "Am I to infer then, Debby, that you told other people on the staff that I said that? That was a throw away comment I made in a conversation you and I were having about something altogether different."*

*"I did talk with a few others about it, yes."*

*“What, may I ask, was the utility in doing that?” It’s nearly impossible now for me not to hide my frustration. “No one had any context for that comment. When we’re talking about trust, it’s decisions like that that I believe really hurt. I’m disappointed, if I’m being honest, that you did that.”*

*“Well, it was disappointing to hear.” Debby says this and looks at L.S.*

*“Ok, well, this is the type of thing we need to work through, and the reason I’m here.”*

*L.S. offers this haughty response. I’m really outnumbered and outgunned now but am not to be deterred.*

*“Before you say anything,” I interrupt, “Let me provide this perspective. Your presence, L.S., is to offer, hopefully, objective perspective to both principals and reps so as to ensure relationships between the two are strong. Am I correct?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Ok. Well, then I hope you can appreciate my perspective. If you’re truly being objective, is there not room for you to give some advice to Debby as well here that telling the staff that serves no purpose other than to undermine my relationship with some and pit us against one another? I’ll concede that I shouldn’t have said it and will be more mindful of the words I choose in the future. I’ll say that I would argue there is zero that can be identified that I have done to purposefully alienate anyone. In fact, I could share specific things for each staff member that I have done to build a relationship. Those things may not be public to everyone. But do they have to be? I believe in the partnership approach. I really do. But it’s reciprocal, L.S., and I make this point to the staff all of the time. I cannot possibly carry the entire relationship alone. That’s missing the entire point and it’s not fair.”*

*L.S. pauses introspectively at this professional challenge from me. “You know, Mr. Yeoman, you’re right.” Pivoting to Debby. “Debby, he’s right. I’ll agree he shouldn’t have said that, and it’s clear to me just from this short meeting that perhaps we need to meet more often. But I really don’t see what you had to gain by sharing something so potentially damaging. That only served to hurt Steve. Hurt his relationship with people here. If we are going to work together, I agree with him, we need to all do our part and be conscious of the decisions. Yours, Debby, is also a position of leadership. You model the relationship we want to have between principals and teachers. Let’s all learn from this and work to not repeat past missteps that run against the grain of what we’re trying to accomplish.”*

*Debby nods in concession. I sit up a little straighter.*

*The meeting lasts for a few more minutes as we knock out a few more nuts and bolts. I emerge from the conference room a bit worse for the wear but emboldened to continue to fight the good fight.*

*“Hi, Mr. Yeoman!” says third grader, Riley, as she passes me in the hall.*

*“Hey, there, Riley! Love that shirt. Is it new? It’s great to see you today!”*

I am electing to include vignettes like these intending to provide for the reader a portrait of the landscape within which I often find myself. They may appear random, lacking connectedness, if only viewed as individual narratives. Encounters and interactions like this, however, do present themselves often, and often unpredictably, and give me pause, prompt me to reflect, or reveal to me a previously unknown layer of my work, the nature of a particular relationship with a colleague, or a dilemma I’m likely to have to work through. Like pieces of a quilt, if stitched

together in the reader's mind, they can be used to create a clearer picture of my perspective on the principalship.

## **Review of Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research literature used to shape and inform this endeavor. As this is a qualitative research undertaking, specifically adopting elements of autoethnography, better knowing me as a professional and researcher is necessary. Not only will this be accomplished by the reader experiencing my life as a principal through the journal entries and narratives I've written and included (detailed more in chapters 3, 4, and 5), but, as so much of who I am is defined by how I live my professional life, familiarization with researchers, books, and precepts with whom and which I subscribe will be of benefit.

I am an elementary building principal, but I also consider myself a student of the profession. It is my intent to continue to inform my perspective on leadership and education, constantly working to better myself, and, in turn, provide the most optimal experience for those with whom I have the privilege to work. As such, I read. A lot. Whether it be research articles, books, magazines, blogs, Twitter feeds—my process for becoming is never at rest. However, I will admit to being susceptible to the veritable cacophony of professional literature and opinion that makes it hard to discern what one truly believes, and, thus, leaves me invariably teetering on philosophical and practitioner fault lines.

That said, as I approached this research and examination of my work, I leaned heavily on a few key texts. This chapter is an opportunity to expand on why it is these texts and their authors found their way into my work and my research and reside in my professional and practitioner conscience.

## **Social Capital Theory**

What has attracted me to Knight's (2011) partnership approach as a model for school improvement is that I see the school I work in as a community. We (students, teachers, central office administration, parents, and principals) each have our respective parts to contribute, but I believe it's when these parts work in harmony with one another that exceptional things can happen. Likewise, when there seems to be disconnect, the work feels more arduous, cynicism begins to escape people's mouths more frequently, and student achievement plateaus. Experience has taught me when these component parts are all working in concert with one another staff morale grows almost palpably, relationships between all stakeholders improve, there's a sense of optimism and a collective belief there's nothing we can't accomplish together, and, of course, student achievement often responds accordingly. I have experienced these moments in my time as principal, but they are fleeting, never harnessed or sustained. So, it has been a wondering of mine: why does this context—one in which passion, purpose and coordination coexist—remain so evasive? School improvement that recommends a partnership approach to school improvement is, in my opinion, worthy of further exploration and scrutiny. Understanding better why a partnership approach is needed at all, however, suggests a more pressing, underlying leadership and systemic dilemma. While there may be merit in exploring other aspects within the community we call school, it is the particular relationship between teachers and their principal that intrigues me most, particularly as it relates to well-intended school improvement initiatives. In order to best establish a theoretical footing for this research, I needed to consider a framework with which to work within. I have ultimately found that social capital theory, in its various iterations, is a nice complement to my efforts.

While there may be others with whom I should familiarize myself regarding social capital theory, it is the work and ideas of Bourdieu (1986; in Swartz, 1997), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000) that, in my opinion, were the most relevant.

Because the social capital accruing from a relationship is that much greater to the extent that the person who is the object of it is richly endowed with capital (mainly social, but also cultural and even economic capital), the possessors of inherited social capital, symbolized by a great name, are able to transform all circumstantial relationships into lasting connections. They are sought after for their social capital, and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known ('I know him well'); they do not need to 'make the acquaintance' of all their 'acquaintances'; they are known to more people than they know, and their work of sociability, when it is exerted, is highly productive. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

To Pierre Bourdieu (in Swartz, 1997) social capital exists as a manifestation of power structures that reside in society. "According to Bourdieu, actors by and large 'mis-recognize' how cultural resources, processes, and institutions lock individuals and groups into reproducing patterns of domination, the task of sociology is to unveil this hidden dimension of power relations" (in Swartz, 1997, p. 8). It is incumbent on leaders then to give credence to this notion of social structure and understand how these power dynamics influence patterns of behavior by individuals, how they can suggest and determine a hierarchy and status and can perhaps govern the manner in which we relate to one another. Bourdieu (in Swartz, 1997) believes "a properly constructed reflexive sociology holds promise for emancipating individuals and groups from the constraints of social determination and domination" (p. 12).



Gauntlett (2011) sees Bourdieu's approach as somewhat cynical, not necessarily suggesting the possibility of social change, but rather describing things the way they are. "Bourdieu's model seems to involve little warmth anywhere: rather, social capital is just a nasty exclusionary device—although its users would see it as neutral and rational" (Gauntlett, 2011, p 3). Swartz (1997) sees Bourdieu's perspective differently. He believes that Bourdieu was, by virtue of identifying existing social inequalities, suggesting an opportunity for liberation, connection and enfranchisement. Social capital theory, according to Bourdieu (in Swartz, 1997), indirectly proposes an aspect of leadership and school as a system that I need to bring to the forefront of my research and practice and to further explore and understand.

Bourdieu's (in Swartz, 1997) definition of social capital as it relates to power structures in the system echoes Apple's (in Flinders and Thornton, 2009) considerations of power dynamics and structural inequalities. Apple (1986) discusses at length how a history of gender bias and class imbalance have led to a "proletarianization" of the working environment of teachers (p. 185):

The two dynamics of class and gender (with race, of course) are not reducible to each other, but intertwine, work off, and codetermine the terrain on which each operates. It is at the intersection of these two dynamics that one can begin to unravel some of the reasons why procedures for rationalizing the work of teachers have evolved. As we shall see, the ultimate effects of these procedures, with the loss of control that accompanies them, can bear in important ways on how we think about the 'reform' of teaching and curriculum and the state's role in it. (p. 186)

In a slightly different interpretation, Coleman argues (1988) "Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in

common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure” (p. 98). Coleman (1988) believes social capital is not necessarily something someone has, but rather something they have access too. It is a product of the strength of the relationships and interconnectedness of a community or organization. According to Coleman (1988), social capital has the potential for creating human capital. This has obvious implications for schools.

As a principal, I need to always consider how the school culture I have helped create engenders a feeling of community and collective efficacy. Hattie (2009), for example, asserts that collective teacher efficacy has the highest effect size and correlation to student achievement. Coleman (1988) discusses the idea of “closure” (p. 108), an attribute of social capital that strengthens the connection and bond between actors. I recognize that decisions I make (or don’t make) as a school leader have an influence on the development of a positive school culture and the creation of greater “closure” in our school. Staff, if they are feeling unified, supported, and valued, are likelier to engage more positively in their work, participate more deliberately in professional growth opportunities, and create positive relationships with students, parents, and teammates. As Coleman (1988) emphasizes, “closure creates trustworthiness in a social structure” (p. 108).

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals— social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when

embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital. (Putnam, 2000, p. 19)

Sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) has written extensively on social capital. To Putnam, there has been a noticeable decline in social capital in American society—that is the networks and relationships that exist within a community.

The dominant theme is simple: For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed, and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century. (Putnam, 2000, p. 27)

Putnam's (2000) social capital speaks to the networks and units of a social structure and community. When rituals and norms are established that help bond together individuals, it can help foster general reciprocity, develop and sustain trusting relationships, and can result in a greater sense of pride and collective purpose. Human beings, according to Putnam (2000) need these social bonds in order to feel connected and feel they are making contributions to a greater cause. School leaders then should consider social capital development as an important ingredient in establishing an effective school culture.

Likewise, when there is strong social capital present in an organization or society, trust, according to Putnam (2000) generally flourishes. As trust in a school, particular as it relates to the important relationship between a principal and the teachers, is such a vital component of a healthy school culture, recognizing the presence or absence of social capital seems of critical importance to principals. Writing directly to this point, Putnam (2000) states, "When there is a

high level of trust among teachers, parents, and principals, these key players are more committed to the central tenets of school improvement. Teachers in high-trust settings feel loyal to the school, seek innovative approaches to learning, reach out to parents, and have a deep sense of responsibility for students' development (p. 305).

### **Against the Backdrop of Education**

In order for the reader to better understand the impetus behind this research effort, it seems prudent to provide context of the educational landscape.

Darling-Hammond (2010) offers:

With the exception of a few states that have had enlightened long-term leadership, the United States, by contrast, has failed to maintain focus investments in a stable, well-prepared teaching force, has allowed the directions of learning to be whipsawed by unproductive “curriculum wars”, and has spent millions creating innovative schools that, although promising, remain at the margins of a system that has not been redesigned to support a 21<sup>st</sup>-century schooling enterprise. (p. 9)

There are omnipresent pressures and rhetoric that suggests schools are failing. Knight (2011) writes “When it comes to the crisis in schools, most of us have been indicted. Parents, television, central office, the government, the unions, teachers, we are all blamed, and of course the blame is usually misguided and unfair” (p. 6). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) echo this sentiment: “How is that the victims of an educational system that has been so deficient for half a century have continued to accomplish so much, and why is that schools represent the fundamental problem in bad times but apparently contribute so little to the good?” (p. 14).

Operating here is a well-known organizational phenomenon called attribution error.

When we see unsatisfactory results, we tend to blame the individuals most immediately

connected to those results, not recognizing the full causes. The evidence from over a half century of effort across numerous sectors and industries is clear: improving productivity in complex systems is not principally about incentivizing more individual effort, preaching about better intentions, or even enhancing individual competence. Rather, it is about designing better processes for carrying out common work problems and creating more agile mechanisms for sensing and reacting to novel situations. (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & Lamahieu, 2015, p. 61)

Standards and standardization of schools has also occupied a great deal of the larger conversation taking place in schools. “One of the consequences of our approach to reform is that the curriculum gets narrowed as school district policies make it clear that what is to be tested is what is to be taught,” observes Eisner. (2001, p. 368) Nel Noddings (in Flinders & Thorton, 2009), on identifying the aims of education states, “We should be deeply troubled by the suggestion that economic equity can be achieved by forcing the same curriculum and standards on all children. The question of what is meant by equity is answered hastily and with little justification” (p. 431). And Au (in Flinders & Thorton, 2009) reports pedagogical shifts associated with high-stakes testing and greater curricular control and “a significant majority of the changes included an increase in teacher-centered instruction associated with lecturing and the direct transmission of test-related facts” (p. 295).

On numerous occasions in my tenure as principal, competent, heartfelt educators have cried in my office after the results of their state assessments have come in. I am torn, of course, because on the one hand, I need to reassure these great educators, people I truly care about, that they are worthy and students are better for having been in their care, all while reemphasizing that

state assessments are a measure (or at least a very perceived measure) of our school's effectiveness. Ravitch (2010) laments,

Testing, I realized with dismay, had become a central preoccupation in the schools and was not just a measure but an end in itself. I came to believe that accountability, as written into federal law, was not raising standards but dumbing down the schools as states and districts strived to meet unrealistic targets. (pp. 12-13)

Few are tone-deaf in education, and this narrative that schools are in dire need of wholesale improvement surely leads to weariness of otherwise well-intentioned, hard-working educators, who are susceptible to the story that we are all underperforming. This is particularly the case when assessment scores (and other measures) are scrutinized ad nauseum and are viewed (singularly) as proxies for instructional effectiveness and general school efficacy.

Educators, like those with whom I work at my school, work within a larger system. Presumably, all are invested and working toward the same end. When rowing in the same direction, great things are possible with respect to teacher effectiveness, professional learning community development, parent and student partnerships, and certainly student-achievement gains. However, Muhammad & Cruz (2019) remind us, "Education is a high-stakes business, not because of a ranking or accountability rating given by a state or government agency, but because educators only get thirteen years to help shape the future of young human beings" (Kindle locations 209-210).

In their essay on research and development practices (R&D), researchers Bryk, Gomez, and Grunow (2011) suggest that a realignment of researcher and practitioner perspective is paramount to future school improvement efforts. Their essay was guided by three questions: "First, what problem(s) are we trying to solve? Second, whose expertise is needed to solve these

problems? And third, what are the social arrangements that will enable this work?" (p. 4).

Researchers, they argue, did the "intellectual heavy lifting at the front end of the idea pipeline, while practitioners, those with on- the-ground experience, were expected to implement and adapt idealized innovations" (Bryk, et.al., 2011, p. 5).

DuFour and Fullan (2013) provide the following compelling information:

A study by Lee Jenkins (2012) found that 95 percent of kindergartners like school, but by grade 9, this percentage decreased to 37. The news is not much better for teachers. A 2012 MetLife Survey (Markow & Peters, 2012) shows that teachers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their jobs, with almost one in three teachers contemplating leaving the profession. Equally shocking is the rapidity of the decline. The survey found that 39 percent of teachers in 2012 were satisfied compared to 62 percent only two years earlier. We have to contemplate what kind of places our schools really are if so many people would rather be somewhere else. (p. 4)

Kim & Abernathy (2012) serve as a text to support the idea that philosophical/pragmatic discord, driven by standardization and centralization exists within the school improvement context and serves as an influence (often an inhibitor to?) partnership development between teachers and principals. In their (2012) research they discuss the consequences of standardization and effects on teacher professional autonomy. They (2012) argue that, "curriculum as a polyphonic text request different voices be heard without having one voice privileged over the others, producing no final, complete truth, thus promoting a genuine dialogue among stakeholders to improve curriculum." (p. 33)

What does all of this mean? It means it's noisy out there. There are simply a ton of competing perspectives, not only about the current state of education, but also what needs to be

done moving forward. The system appears to be constantly and continuously under threat. But we do recognize, not only is there an ethical and professional imperative to find solutions to school problems (perceived, real, or misguided, as they may be), there is a moral imperative, as well. Principals, teachers, parents, district-level leaders, all have a responsibility to behave in ways that help create the best environments for students (and teachers!) and foster student-achievement and healthy school cultures. Who better to work to solve school-related problems, I argue, than those directly involved, those living the realities of the system of school?

*It's a Tuesday morning. Early. The office is quiet. Save for a few of the early arrivers, I'm the only one at school.*

*I'm rereading an article on "threat rigidity", a concept that I think I need to examine further. The thesis of the article is essentially that due to outside "threats" on an organization, members of that organization behave differently. In many cases, members don't even realize their behavior is in direct response to the threats they are perceiving.*

*The authors (Staw, Sandelands & Dutton, 1981) identify possible repercussions of "threat rigidity"(p. 500). "First, a threat may result in the restriction of information processing such as a narrowing in the field of attention, a simplification in information codes, or a reduction in the number of channels used. Second, when a threat occurs, there may be a constriction in control, such that power and influence can become more concentrated or placed in higher levels of a hierarchy"(p. 502). I'm thinking about this idea and wondering if we have a tendency to respond to the threats in our environment at school in a manner that reflects this concept.*

*For example, each year we receive school performance data on a nationally normed achievement test. The students take the test three times each year, Fall, Winter, and Spring.*



*While this does measure achievement, the assessment also measures academic growth over instructional periods (Fall to Fall, Fall to Spring, and so on). A great deal of emphasis is placed on this assessment in grades 3-6. In collaborative team meetings, we review previous year's data, identify students who are demonstrating they need academic intervention, and set grade level goals for growth.*

*All of it seems relatively benign. I mean, what's the harm in setting goals for achievement? And there is obviously merit, in the spirit of professional learning community development, to engage teachers in data review and team problem-solving. However, I'm thinking about the pressure, the threat, from the district to reach certain benchmarks. At some point, we decided, completely arbitrarily, that classrooms should work to hit 80% growth in their classrooms. In other words, 80% of the students in a class should meet their projected Fall to Spring growth target as defined by this assessment, in both Reading and Math. This despite some members of the district assessment team quietly acknowledging that 50% is statistically average, and 80% is an incredibly high watermark, perhaps unreasonably so.*

*The article identifies individual-level effects of threat rigidity such as anxiety, and psychological and physiological stress (Staw, et.al, 1981). I had a team that last year collectively had some of the lowest growth data in their particular grade, in the entire district. The achievement data was actually relatively high, but the growth data for the grade, as measured by this particular assessment, was uncharacteristically low. I'm reflecting on my response to this data and how I may have unwittingly reinforced something with that group of great teachers. I can only imagine the level of anxiety and psychological stress this surely caused, having to view these results in front of their peers, or me, as their evaluator. Certainly, I feel the pressure from the district to meet certain student performance expectations. Ours is a*

*traditionally high-performing school. Assessment results like those definitely raise eyebrows, or at least I believe they do. It's not the data that's the threat, though, right? It's the system. It's the narrative and the messaging at the district-level that these data directly suggest something about our overall school effectiveness. Teachers surely internalize these data as reflections of their efficacy.*

*A group-level effect, say the authors (Staw, et.al., 1981) is a tendency to move toward uniformity. I have observed this very phenomenon, again, with this particular assessment. The district takes the building growth data from this assessment and will place schools in rank order of performance. I know that I am drawn to this list and make assumptions about our school's effectiveness depending on what "place" we land. I then look at who is outperforming us and will often reach out to those principals and ask them "what's their secret"? I suppose sharing best practices is not a bad thing, as a general rule. I think it's more that I want to be mindful of the motivation and not run the risk of inadvertently disregarding something of value, because I "drank the kool-aid", as the saying goes. How much then do I pivot with teachers in the face of unflattering data? Do I talk out of both sides of my mouth? How much does me saying one thing, but then behaving differently impact our school culture? Does my perceived threat from the district, in the form of these data rankings, impact what and how I communicate priorities to staff? Surely. That's tough to swallow.*

### **The Principalship**

*The voice of the principal carries more weight than anyone else's in a school (Knight, 2011, p. 50).*

I had zero aspirations to become a building principal. I was working in my preservice coursework and one of my professors asked if I was interested in pursuing a degree in

Educational Leadership. I said, “Yeah, I don’t think so. I see myself more as a life-time classroom teacher.” He said, “That’s nonsense. There’s no money in this business if you don’t get into administration!” I don’t know that was the most persuasive of arguments, but I recall that conversation vividly and have now been a practicing school administrator for over a decade.

Honestly, there’s really very little I’ve not had to work through in my time as principal. I have been the supervisor/evaluator of hundreds of adults, many as a very young principal, with some having been educators literally longer than I had been alive. I have endured being nearly physically assaulted on more than one occasion and have had to sit across from young teachers and tell them they were being non-renewed. I have had to facilitate impossibly intense team meetings about students, broken up student fights, I’ve been criticized publically in the newspaper, faced the ire of parents who were feeling dissatisfied with their school experience, rallied a school community around a sick student, and even helped the staff work to heal after having lost a long-time building favorite teacher when he passed of pancreatic cancer mid-year. So many celebrations, as well. Students achieving beyond expectation, teachers receiving awards and recognition, positive parent notes about how incredible they found our schools, staff earning their degrees and taking leadership positions of their own.

I’ve done all of this while also juggling the myriad responsibilities related to the role of principal. These include but are certainly not limited to, supervision/evaluation of staff, hiring and retaining staff, budgeting, student discipline management, community partnering, instructional practice accountability, professional development, student/school community oversight, and long-term school improvement planning. Additionally, I see mine as a career apprenticeship, so I am constantly working toward professional renewal and development. Fullan (2014) refers to this as “learning leader” (p. 9).

## **A Continually Shifting Role**

Fullan (2014) shares, “Ask teachers what school they would most like to teach in, or whether they want to stay in teaching at all and you will hear of two criteria that top their lists: the quality of their colleagues and the quality of school leadership” (p. 5). Given the role of principal is regarded as one of the most critical in the pursuit of effective schooling, the question then becomes what behaviors and attributes are regarded as most effective? I’ve found the answer is: Depends on who you ask.

Lethwood (1992) makes the case that transformational leader best defines the required role principals should model. “School administrators must focus their attention on using facilitative power to make second-order changes in their schools. ‘Transformational leadership’ provides such a focus (p. 9). This is markedly different, he argues, than the traditional school model of transactional leadership—a model that includes competition, top-down directives, and “is based on an exchange of services (from a teacher, for example) for various kinds of rewards (salary, recognition, and intrinsic rewards) that the leader controls, at least in part” (p. 9).

Lethwood (1992) characterizes these two approaches as “type A” and “type Z” organizations. With a type A organization the focus is on power whether that be on employee selection, resource allocation, or the focus for staff professional learning. A type Z organization, by contrast, relies on, “strong cultures to influence employees’ directions and reduce differences in the status of organizational members”...they are based on a radically different form of power that is ‘consensual’ and ‘facilitative’ in nature—a form of power manifested through other people, not over other people” (Lethwood, 1992, p. 9).

Hattie (2015), however, argues a different perspective. “Transformational leaders focus more on teachers. They set a vision, create common goals for the school, inspire and set

direction, buffer staff from external demands, ensure fair and equitable staffing, and give teachers a high degree of autonomy” (Hattie, 2015, p. 37). Instructional leaders by contrast focus on students. They are involved in the measuring of impact. They conduct classroom visits, believe professional development enhances learning, and communicate high academic standards (Hattie, 2015). This is a confusing message, of course, for principals. Are we suggesting transformational leaders *don't* care about these things? What's wrong with focus on teachers anyway? Hattie (2015) supports his claim by citing that transformational leaders' overall effect was .11 and the overall effect of instructional leadership was .42. (An effect size is a method for comparing results in different measures on a scale that allows for comparisons independent of the original test. It's used to establish and suggest correlative information. On a 0-100 scale, the higher the effect is, close to 100, or 1.0, the greater the correlation and effect size.) (Hattie, 2015).

Hattie (2015) goes on to cite attributes or “mind-frames” (2015, p. 37) that are indicative of instructional leadership:

Understand the need to focus on learning and the impact of teaching; believe their fundamental task is to evaluate the effect of everyone in their school on student learning; believe that success and failure in student learning is about what they, as teachers or leaders, did or didn't do. They see themselves as change agents; See assessment as feedback on their impact; understand the importance of dialogue and of listening to student and teacher voice; set challenging targets for themselves and for teachers to maximize student outcomes; welcome errors, share what they've learning from their own errors, and create environments in which teacher and students can learn from errors without losing face. (2015, p. 37)

Fullan (2014) makes the case that principals experienced a watershed moment about a decade ago, when schools really began focusing on standards and instructional practice. Whereas before the role of principal was more of a systems manager, the system then began to shift away from classroom and teacher autonomy to a more broad-scale focus on instruction and instructional practice. “The role of the principal shifted dramatically toward an instructional focus, but it was also the case that the system was throwing the principal off kilter with enormous demands” (p. 11). He further adds, “the principal needs to become a balanced leader—minimizing the counterproductive actions and specializing in the generative actions that yield positive results” (Fullan, 2014, p. 21). But what are these?

Goodwin (2019) recounts that the instructional leadership movement emerged in the 1970s. In reviewing data on effective schools, researchers sought to identify the key ingredient and determined that leaders who focused on instruction led schools with the best results. Principals then became instructional leaders, but as Goodwin (2019) points out,

in the ensuing years, scholars proposed dueling lists of key traits for instructional leadership. As the lists grew, so did question, including whether it was humanly possible to be an instructional leader. How could anyone, short of a bite from a radioactive spider, do everything scholars, superintendent, and policymakers expected of principal?

(Goodwin, 2019, p. 82)

As schools began to focus on instructional practice, Berg (2019) claims, “Principals stepped up to this challenge of embracing instructional leadership. To their administrative responsibilities, they added the commitment to setting expectations for instructional practice and supporting teachers to meet those expectations” (p. 86). But Berg (2019) concedes, however, that “it’s unrealistic to expect that any single individual, like a principal, would have deep expertise

in every content area, pedagogical and progress monitoring strategy, child development level, and classroom management approach found in a school.” (p. 86) She even says that being *the* instructional leader may actually hold schools back from improvement because it keeps teachers from playing the necessary role they should share as instructional leaders themselves! (Berg, 2019).

*“Hey, can I pick your brain about something?” This I ask of Kathy, a fifth-year teacher at my school. She is someone with whom I have a good relationship. Bright, professional, reflective, always willing to engage and participate. She’s a principal’s dream. There’s trust there and provides lubrication for open conversation. She’s sitting opposite me in my office. While my desk separates us and suggests our roles, we are able to speak as equals.*

*“Of course. What’s up?”*

*“So, you know I’m working on my dissertation. Have been for several years now.”*

*“Yes. I do. How’s the progress?” she asks, demonstrating genuine interest.*

*“Well, I’m writing about Impact Schools, you know, the Jim Knight work we started a few years ago. I’m fascinated by the idea of partnership in school improvement efforts. Haven’t made that a secret. I really believe it to be the right way to go, but in my experience, it has trouble taking root. Everything he writes with respect to dialogue, praxis, autonomy, shared leadership, etc., clearly resonates with everyone. So, I’m so perplexed why a) this idea hasn’t found a greater audience, and b) why doesn’t it seem to work?”*

*She pauses for a bit before responding. “Well, first, I say, define ‘work’. And, honestly, I think it has to do with role dynamics.”*

*“Really? What do you mean by that?”*

*“Steve, people don’t know how to see you as an equal. That’s not how it’s supposed to work, you know. You’re the boss. I’m supposed to hate you.” She says this with a bit of a smirk, but I know the point she’s driving at.*

*She continues, “Think about some of the people we work with here. They’ll just never go for the partnership approach. They’re too self-centered, too jaded, and too cynical. And I’m not trying to be a downer, just acknowledging the reality. They might smile and nod in agreement in a meeting and in your presence, but then they’re going to turn around and behave the opposite in the lounge or out of earshot.”*

*I sigh. “But that’s what I’m talking about, Kathy. Why do they behave that way? That’s what I want to understand. It’s not enough just to acknowledge it and condemn it. And, respectfully, I don’t want to just accept it. I think that would be very lazy of me. Perhaps it’s naïve, but I think it’s important to know what’s driving some of that teacher behavior. I know it’s there, but that’s what partnership is supposed to address, right? Working from this perspective should help correct that, in the long term. Are you suggesting it’s not worth the investment?”*

*“No, no. Not at all!” she says as she sits up a bit straighter in her chair. “I am not. And I certainly don’t want to suggest it’s not worth your time. It’s admirable what you’re trying to do. I think more should recognize the gesture, frankly. I’ve not worked for many principals who even think that way. And maybe that’s my point. It’s such a departure from regular principal/teacher interaction that I think teachers, and maybe just the ones here, really don’t know what to do with it. Because it’s not something we’re used to, our natural inclination is to seek out ulterior motives. If I’m supposed to hate you, then I might see this partnership idea as something manipulative. Does that make sense?”*



*“Well, sure. And there’s lots of research that I’ve read that speaks to that very thing. Impact Schools talks about this context we find ourselves in. That’s what I’m trying to address here. I know what’s getting in our way, and the partnership approach is my sincere attempt at working to correct it. It’s hard to be a principal and vulnerable.” I pause, then continue, “Someone once said to me, ‘You don’t empower others by disempowering yourself’. Do you think that’s what’s happening here? Is this approach suggesting to some a lack of competence?” This conversation is leaving me frustrated, but it’s good to think out loud with someone, particularly someone that is directly impacted by my decision-making.*

*She considers this, looks past me in reflection. “I don’t know. This is a really tough group, Steve. Sometimes they’re just terrible to each other, you. I don’t know what’s driving that behavior. All I know is what I see and hear. They’re not reckless enough to do it in front of you, but they definitely don’t see how some of their behaviors are negatively influencing the culture here. And you have to remember it’s not everyone. Just a few voices. But they seem to be the loudest. You came in here and inherited a culture that had existed for over twenty years. No matter your intentions or level of effectiveness, no matter how hard you work, that isn’t something easily overcome. That culture just absorbs people. They just fold in, you know.”*

*At this, I say nothing. I think she thinks she upset me, because she says, “I think you’re really great at what you do, Steve. And a lot of people think like me. Don’t let what I’m saying deter you from what you think is the right course. That’s why you’re in your role and I’m in mine. I don’t have your perspective. You asked what I thought was getting in the way of partnership, and I just wanted to share what I thought may be some contributing factors. That’s all. Ha. Maybe it’s me who’s the cynical one!” She looks at her watch. “My plan time is almost*

*over, and I have to go get my kids from the library. Hang in there. For what it's worth, I really appreciate the gesture that you'd even ask me what I thought. Enjoy the rest of your morning."*

*I smile as she exits the office. People are supposed to hate me? That's the way things are? Whew, I really have an uphill battle, if that's the case.*

### **Partnership in School Improvement Efforts**

I have always been a fan of educational researcher Jim Knight's thoughts on education, instruction, and leadership. I've attended conferences he has hosted, read several of his books (Knight, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015), and have worked to introduce staff to his ideas about instruction, school culture, and instructional coaching. Though I have been a practicing principal for some time now, having attempted many different strategies to engage staff in the school improvement process, while striving to advance the existing school culture, it was when I came across Knight's *Unmistakable Impact* (2011) that I truly felt I had encountered something unique. I think what drew me to this text, in particular, was how he portrayed teachers and their work.

Too often, educators, worn down by continual social and professional criticism (from politicians, journalists, parents, administrators, students, and others), slowly stop trying to improve. Defeated by the roadblocks that keep them from having the impact they hope to have on students, and naturally determined to protect their self-esteem, educators may adopt a defensive stance, blaming others for their lack of success rather than asking what they and their peers can do to reach more children. Feeling frustrated and defeated, many of these educators give up and stop their own learning. (Knight, 2011, p. 4)

Knight's work (2011, 2012, 2014, 2015) was one of the first I could recall that spoke to the actions of the principal, and the system, by first looking at the role of the teacher and his/her relationship to the work and the context of teaching. Knight (2011) writes,

I share leaders' desire to move schools forward as quickly as possible. However, I fear that the strategy of telling teachers what to do and making sure they do often by punitive measures is one of the reasons why schools do not move forward. (p. 6)

Knight (2011) instead prescribes a "partnership approach" (p. 28) to school improvement and principal leadership. His claim is that too often the voice of the teacher is silenced, resulting in a disruption in the communication flow and relationship with administrators and district level leadership that is critical to professional development, culture building, and student achievement. Simply put, he advocates for professional learning *with* teachers as opposed to having it done to them.

An Impact School, according to Knight (2011) is centered around five core concepts: humanity, focus, leverage, simplicity, and precision. These ideas serve as the undercurrent to what he prescribes for schools wishing to engage teachers in the endeavor of school improvement. Considerations of precision, focus, leverage, and simplicity, of course, were not new to me, as these, in some way shape or form, find their way into much of the literature on leadership. It was the introduction of humanity into the conversation that I found so refreshing and intriguing. "Humanity is not a concept we hear a lot of when people talk about professional learning, but I believe the absence of humanity within professional learning is precisely why it frequently fails" (Knight, 2011, p. 7). Understanding the degree to which teachers may feel disenfranchised by the typical approach to leadership and improvement efforts, and the root

causes for this to be the case, is something experience was teaching me I needed to explore a little further and consider with a great deal more care.

As I examined barriers to partnership development I used the work of DuFour, DuFour & Eaker (2008) in their book *Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work*. This book, I felt, was critical in my examination of challenges associated with improvement efforts and obstacles related to teacher development. Their book serves as an excellent source to detail the challenges with reform and provided me necessary leadership perspective.

As the theme of my own learning story became manifest throughout the implementation of the Impact School work, I turned to Knight (2011), but also considered the work of Macintyre, Latta and Kim (2008), who explore the consequences of current policy development and the cost related to teacher agency. Theirs is an appeal to both policy makers and to teachers themselves to engage in praxis and understand teaching as a moral imperative. Rendering the teacher as mere technician, they argue, diminishes the relationship between teacher and student, and undermines the essence of the teacher/teaching condition (2008). This served then as relevant text for my understanding of current teaching conditions and helped underscore and affirm the importance of partnership development efforts in my leadership practice.

As a principal having worked in different districts, alongside different teams and leadership, I can attest that not all conversations about teachers are positive. Not unlike a teacher lamenting, *If only little Johnny wasn't in my class, I could actually teach!* Principals too, I've found, speak to teachers in a similar respect: *Culture building is impossible with this group! How am I supposed to raise the test scores in my building when I've been assigned these adults who just don't care? I AM leading, they're just not following!* All of these sentiments have been

expressed in my presence, and, unfortunately, I'll admit to having engaged in unproductive talk like this when the work has gotten tough.

### **Trust as an Element of a Strong School Culture**

Trusting teachers communicates that you value them and believe in them. Teachers who are trusted take risks and collaborate with their colleagues. They work longer hours.

They are committed to maintaining a healthy culture—a place where everyone looks forward to coming to work. Most important, they build on this foundation of trust and collaboration to create engaging, rigorous learning opportunities for their students.

(MODOONO, 2017, p. 1)

As I considered more the partnership approach to the principalship, a recurring theme that seemed to emerge in my research and exploration was the concept of trust. The idea of trust as a research abstraction is its own highway replete with various off and on ramps. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) provide context, “Although themes of trust and betrayal have long been the subject of philosophers and politicians, the systematic investigation of trust by social scientists is of relative recent vintage” (p. 184). Tschannen-Moran (2004) offers, “Without trust, friction and ‘heat’ are generated that bog down the work of the organization. Schools need trust to foster communication and facilitate efficiency” (p. 2). The absence of trust, according to Lencioni (2002), lies at the heart of any team’s capacity to be effective. “Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust” (p. 188). This absence of trust then leads to other potential team dysfunctions (Lencioni, 2002) such as: fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. Gordon (2002) reminds us,

Although power in schools, as in most institutions, is not distributed evenly – principals have more than teachers, teachers more than parents – all parties are ultimately dependent on each other to succeed, and therefore everyone is to some extent vulnerable. Actions are important, but so are intentions. On a daily basis, trust is raised or diminished depending on whether the way we act – and why – is consistent with the expectations we have agreed to. (p. 2)

All of this to say, trust as a contributing factor in establishing partnership in schools must be a consideration for building leaders. The research clearly demonstrates that without it, building leaders will struggle to be impactful, the work of teachers will be more burdensome and less rewarding, and the climate and culture of the school overall will be impaired.

My analysis of trust as a factor in partnership-building leaned heavily on a few key texts. First, Kochanek (2005) discusses why trust is so important in schools and schooling. Parents, for example, place a high degree of trust in classroom teachers and principals to provide a safe, constructive, and meaningful experience for their students. Students trust their teachers will be engaging, deliver impactful lessons, and create a classroom environment that is respectful and individualized. Teachers not only must have faith in their leaders, but also in one another. They must lean on colleagues when situations with parents, students, or the system are challenging and the work is especially arduous. Not only is there trust that these aforementioned school qualities exist, there is an expectation they do. Given there is no reasonable means by which to verify the effectiveness and quality of the relationships in a school, we rely on “institutionalized myths” (Kochanek, 2005, p. 3). Essentially, institutionalized myths suggest an if-there’s-not-smoke-there’s-likely-not-fire approach to school leadership and monitoring of the component parts. Kochanek (2005) refers to this as a “logic of confidence” (p. 3)

People have faith that others are doing what they are supposed to be doing. In an atmosphere where adequate performance is assumed rather than verifiable, degrees of competence are not discernable, and only gross incompetence is detected. Thus, parents assume that teachers are doing what they can to produce learning in their children.

Teachers assume that their colleagues are acting appropriately behind classroom doors.

Without evidence to the contrary, the school continues to operate with legitimacy. (p. 4)

Where it is absent, building leaders need to understand better how to develop trust. Initially, trust, Kochanek (2005) believes is created when social similarities exist. In other words, people tend to generally trust more those with whom they share similar values, occupation, religion, race, or class. However, she argues, these alone are rarely sustainable, but have to be reinforced through subsequent actions (Kochanek, 2005). Trust is further developed through the establishment, adherence to, and fulfillment of social contracts and transactions.

We continue to debate today how best to measure academic achievement. The measurement of other goals, such as character development, would prove even more arduous. Good teaching, the role of the school in character development, and the obligations of teachers and principals to their students are determined by individual social understandings of schooling. These individual understandings must be shared and transmitted through group norms and social cues expressed in everyday interactions among individuals. By agreeing on these obligations, participants in a school community can better fulfill one another's expectations and in doing so form trusting relationships. (Kochanek, 2005, pp. 11-12)

Building leaders, Kochanek (2005) argues, will be well-served understanding trust is a developmental process and should be deliberate and engaged in intentional acts that help foster

trust. For example, by creating a common vision, all staff have a shared stake in the well-being of the school. Additionally, through low-risk interactions and exchanges, trust and vulnerability can be developed over time. Creating opportunities for, and finding success in, high-risk exchanges firmly establishes that team members have reason to believe a relationship or individual is trustworthy. Lastly, Kochanek (2005) argues the need for administrators to shift responsibility and ownership of school-wide decision-making to teachers.

Shared governance offers a forum for trust development in that it requires high-risk interactions that center on improving the work of the school and involves increasing the technical and leadership skills of the teaching staff. In this sense, it promotes positive discernments of others' integrity and competence. (Kochanek, 2005, p. 30).

Kochanek's (2005) position here very much affirms the use of school improvement models like Impact Schools and the partnership approach.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) has also explored extensively the issue of trust as it relates to schools, relationships between teachers, and its implications for building leaders interested in shaping school cultures in the positive. Defining trust, Tschannen-Moran offers,

Trust matters because we cannot single-handedly either create or sustain many of the things we care about most. Trust is manifest in situations where we must rely on the competence of others and their willingness to look after that which is precious to us. (p. 17).

Working to implement an Impact Schools approach to fostering a partnership with the teachers with whom I work, I would be remiss not to acknowledge my role as principal, the inherent stress this may place on a relationship with a teacher that I evaluate and supervise, and how this



may obstruct my ability to form a trusting relationship. Indeed, Tschannen-Moran (2014) highlights this very leadership dilemma:

The reality of life in organizations is that individuals are vested with varying degrees of power and authority. Because of the hierarchical nature of the relationships within a school, the principal exercises considerable authority over teachers and staff members. Within this asymmetrical relationship, it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships. (p. 40)

As a building principal, I must be aware of the influence my role as leader of the school has on the relationships of the people I work alongside. Schools are, as Tschannen-Moran (2014) acknowledges, naturally hierarchical. While this aspect of school structure cannot be helped, it can be acknowledged and understood, and I can at least use the influence of my role as principal to more deliberately cultivate trusting relationships.

Developing trusting relationships with staff does not come without intentional effort on the part of the principal. Tschannen-Moran (2014) also identifies factors that influence developing trust with staff. “School leaders,” she writes, “need to understand that a number of factors come into play as trust develops. Trust judgments can be influenced by one’s disposition to trust; by values and attitudes, especially attitudes concerning diversity; and by moods and emotions” (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 53).

To Tschannen-Moran (2014), trust represents a critical element for building leaders and organizations to consider and assess. She identifies five facets of trust—benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (p. 251) — as key to trust development. These facets need to be reviewed as they impact relationships between district-level administrators and principals, parents and teachers, between teachers, teachers and students, and most importantly, between

principals and the classroom teachers they are entrusted to support. As she writes, “Trustworthy leadership gets everyone on the same team, pulling in the same direction” (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 264).

In a case study analysis Leis & Rimm-Kaufman (2015) identify three themes related to principal actions that influence teacher-principal trust: “1) Acknowledging existing conflict; 2) Prioritizing relationships, and 3) Empowering teachers through shared decision-making” (p. 6). *It is a Wednesday morning and a parent has requested a meeting with me. It’s a little rainy outside and my head’s not yet in the game, as they say. I’m hoping that after this cup of coffee just brewed I’ll be better able engage.*

*The parent has requested the meeting because a teacher has reportedly “insulted” her son in class. Upon receiving the email, I immediately asked if I could give her a call to discuss, but she insisted on a face-to-face. The time is 7:45: students should begin arriving soon. I’ve already had to turn away two teachers who have peeked their head in asking for time, telling them I was expecting a parent any minute.*

*The secretary wraps on the door and lets me know that Ms. Johnson has arrived and is ready for me when I am. I walk to the doorway and wave, “Good morning, Ms. Johnson,” I say, a smile returned in my direction. “Please. Come on in.”*

*We sit facing one another around my seating area I’ve created in my office. I like having this choice. I believe that me seated at my desk can be intimidating in some cases, and this less formal seating arrangement can promote a greater sense of mutual respect and can lead to more productive conversations.*

*“So,” I begin, “I got your email. Thank you for making time to come see me about your concern. What has happened that I can help with?”*

*“Yes, thank you, Mr. Yeoman, for seeing me. I know you’re busy, but I thought this was particularly important.” I don’t know Ms. Johnson well. My school is replete with parents competing for my attention and are rarely shy about sharing their opinions on ways in which I can improve our school. However, Ms. Johnson is a working mom, a nurse, I believe, and her hours don’t permit her to be as present as some of my other parents. I can tell in her body language she’s a little nervous to be here this morning.*

*“My son, Lawrence, he’s a third grader.”*

*“Of course. I know Lawrence. He’s a really neat kid,” I say, smiling. I do know him. He’s a soft-spoken kid, blonde hair, seems well-adjusted, nice group of friends.*

*“Well, then you know that Lawrence wouldn’t ever intentionally cause problems at school. He’s maybe not the best student, academically, but I know he tries and he very much cares about what his teachers think of him. He’s always very respectful.” Her voice has a bit of a waver to it. I can tell all of this is embarrassing her a bit.*

*“Yes, that’s the Lawrence I know.”*

*“Lawrence came home yesterday and shared that he doesn’t want to come to school at Broadmoor anymore. He said he’s pretty sure his teacher doesn’t like him.”*

*I frown, “Really? Well, that’s terrible to hear. What’s this about?”*

*“Well, he told me something last night after school. Now, I know parents come in here all of the time and tell you their kid never lies. And I’m sure Lawrence has probably been dishonest with me about something, but I could tell he was really telling me the truth. He said that his teacher called him ‘stupid’ in front of the class. He said that she was very angry at him, raised her voice, and crumpled up his paper and threw it in the trash. In front of the whole class.”*

*I sigh.*

*“Now, Mr. Yeoman, I realize teaching is difficult. I can’t imagine what it’s like to try and work with all of the needs of twenty different kids, but I really can’t see a reason why a teacher would think it was necessary to belittle a student like that so publicly, or at all, frankly. I know this teacher is an older teacher and has the reputation for being pretty strict. Strict I can handle. I like and respect orderly classrooms, but there’s no place for meanness. I don’t want Lawrence feeling uncomfortable in his own classroom. And no one wants to believe their teacher hates them.”*

*“Wow, Ms. Johnson. I’m so very sorry to hear that Lawrence reported this and had this sort of exchange with his teacher. Yes, his teacher is a veteran teacher, and she does run a tight ship. That’s definitely one of her strengths. I agree, however, that we always want to ensure relationships remain our top priority and students should always feel safe in their classrooms.”*  
*In my mind, I unfortunately can picture something resembling this exchange happening. Not only does this teacher have a reputation for being pretty harsh with students, I’ve been witness to her raising her voice and getting after kids in a way that’s prompted me to have to bring it to her attention. It’s been a conversation piece between us more than a few times.*

*“What can you do to help ensure this doesn’t happen again, Mr. Yeoman?” I’ve given her the safe space to express her concern, and I can tell that once she’s felt confident to say the difficult thing, she is resolved now to get a response from me. Don’t blame her.*

*“Ms. Johnson, I’m not shy with the staff about my expectations for classroom management and giving students constructive feedback. I’ll of course want an opportunity to talk with Lawrence’s teacher myself, and share with her what you shared with me. She has a*

*right to know, I'm sure you agree. May I ask, why did you decide to bring this to me and not the teacher? I'm glad you did, of course, just curious."*

*"Well, I guess I find her to be pretty intimidating. I've only met her the one time at parent night in the fall and I found her to be a little intense and somewhat off-putting. I honestly didn't think she'd believe me. I thought it may be better to come to you. Besides, Lawrence actually said, 'I think this is something you should talk to Mr. Yeoman about.' He was the one who really wanted me to come visit with you."*

*I smile. "That's nice Lawrence feels that I'm here to act in his best interest."*

*"I tell you what, Ms. Johnson. With your permission, I'm going to set up a meeting with Lawrence's teacher and then you can expect to hear from her to discuss this situation sometime by day's end. I will then call you in the morning to see how it went and what next steps may be required for further resolution. How does that sound to you?"*

*At this, she nods. "Thank you. Yes, that would be fine. Maybe if she talks to you first, she and I will have a better chance at a productive conversation."*

*"That is my hope as well."*

*Ms. Johnson stands, we shake hands, and I walk her to the door of the office.*

*"Thank you for coming to see me this morning and for feeling safe enough to share something difficult," I say, shaking her hand again, warmly.*

*She smiles, "Have a nice day, Mr. Yeoman. Thank you for all you do."*

*Returning to my office I'm a little irritated. I realize there will be conflict at times in a school, and it is my job, often, to find solutions in those difficult times. However, it really does seem that sometimes it's the same individuals who regularly make the most work for me. I want to give Lawrence's teacher the benefit of the doubt on this one, but I don't know she's earned*

*that. I do know, I'm best served by reviewing notes I took from the meeting with Ms. Johnson and really constructing my talking points before bringing this to the teacher's attention. While we ultimately get to a place of mutual understanding, past experience with this teacher has taught me that going into something like this with an attitude of help and support, as opposed to one of reprimand, will help us enjoy a more productive dialogue. That's not how I want to approach it, of course. I have so little patience for meanness, particularly when it's directed at students, but each individual requires a somewhat unique approach from me. We'll hope that she is receptive to my recommendations for resolution.*

*I sit back down at my desk, find her room number, her class will be getting started in just a few minutes. "Hi, it's Steve. Good morning. Hey, so Ms. Johnson, Lawrence's mom, just left my office. It looks like you have a break around 10 o'clock this morning. I'd like for you to carve out a few minutes to come talk with me."*

## Chapter 3 - Methodology

*“Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and theories and values but also to new ways of living our lives—and that is the most daunting threat of all.” – Parker Palmer*

*Richardson (1994) on writing:*

*I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it. I was taught, however, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. (p. 517)*

*Can a person think a dissertation? If so, this thing would have been written ten times over. It's overwhelming, frankly. And who am I to contribute to the conversation? I'm just a principal of an elementary school. Not always a very effective one at that. I wade into the research and literature, make sense of most of what I read, trying to absorb it and situate it within my current professional context. But I'm not an academic. I wonder if the researchers with whom I've encountered have always written and thought the way they have, or does it come with practice? Is it a gift that you're born with, or does it evolve over time, as you live in the world of theory and theorists?*

*I remember many years ago, when first contemplating a direction to choose, my advisor at the time, Dr. Kim, saying that she thought autoethnography would have great potential—tell my lived story as a building principal, she said. Was mine (ours) a voice that is not provided ample audience in the literature? She believed so.*

*As I ponder the methodology chapter of this dissertation, I am wrestling with so many things. Mostly, they come from a general feeling of inadequacy to the task. It's so terribly heavy. Sure, I could write to the trials and tribulations of my day-to-day work. But who's listening? Who really cares? This, I believe, is the rub. How do you write a story worth listening to, without sounding self-indulgent? (There's much to read on this very conversation, I'm finding). Who wants to read a principal's woe-is-me tale? Probably no one. Richardson (1994) speaks to this dilemma I'm facing. "Unlike qualitative work," she says, "which can carry its meaning in its tables and summaries, qualitative work depends upon people's reading it" (p. 517).*

*"It seems foolish at best, and narcissistic and wholly self-absorbed at worst, to spend months or years doing research that ends up not being read and making a difference to anything but the author's career," laments Richardson (1994, p. 517). I think about my writing constantly. There is a running loop of internal dialogue. I have these moments of perceived profound insight. Epiphanies. "Moments of rupture" (Poulos, 2012, p.323). I think of the thing I want to say and precisely how I want to say it. But then, oddly, I sit down, and the words escape me, trailing off around the corner. I chase them, see their shadows, but they have disappeared in the alley. Hidden. Too timid to emerge. So, I sit at my computer, trying to recall them, or conjure something similar, something inspiring, something original. Nothing. Nothing comes.*

*"How do we create texts that are vital? That are attended to? That make a difference?" (Richardson, 1994, p. 517).*

*The impotence of available language to me proves too much to bear, I lose the staring contest with my computer screen. Nope. Better to not say anything, than say the wrong thing, or say something insufficient, something hollow and tired. We'll try this another day.*



## Overview and Methodology Purpose

This journal entry reflects much of my dissertation path, a fledgling effort from a novice ethnographer. Truth? I struggle even labeling myself that now, not altogether sure I've earned the designation. But maybe if I name myself an ethnographer, I'll behave as one? Schon (1983) says, "There are those who choose the swampy lowlands. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through" (p. 43). This quote is one that I was introduced to early in my graduate studies. I remain intrigued and compelled by this notion of wrestling with something unmapped and ill-defined, ontological in nature, and a departure from the typical work of a practicing school administrator. With this in mind, and a great deal of influence from my graduate advisor at the time, Dr. Jeong-Hee Kim, I dove into narrative inquiry as a research methodology, with a specific focus on autoethnography.

Much of my work in schools, as both a classroom teacher and a building principal, appears to be grounded in a standardized, technical work, and positivistic framework. There are "learning assumptions already in place as to what is valued and why. Evidence-based practices encouraged in most professional development workshops are applied instrumental acts intended to fix what is not working, reducing teaching and learning to predefined behaviors, finite goals, and preestablished rules and skills (Latta & Kim, 2010, p. 138). I want to know more. Know better. Know different.

Kim (2016) says, "We become other than what we have been by interrogating ourselves. Hence, we are, in a sense, always in the way of becoming" (p. 31). Such is the way of my thinking about my work as a building principal. Returning to Knight's (2011) notion of

partnership, it was his book *Unmistakable Impact* that found me at the time of my initial considerations on the methodology I would ultimately elect to use for my research. I was working through my graduate coursework, reading the likes of Schon (1983), Eisner (1998), Riesmann (2008), and Clandinin and Connelly (2000), when I went to a workshop hosted by Jim Knight. He had just written *Unmistakable Impact* (2011) and the ideas he put forth resonated with me and provided me with a dramatic shift in perspective regarding how I wanted to approach my work and role as a practicing principal. So much of my work as a principal preceding Knight (2011) was driven by a litany of how-to's on leadership. The frameworks and messaging all seemed to position the principal as separate from those they are leading. This us/them mentality captured in conversations, reading, and behaviors of those with whom I worked alongside at the leadership level were not in keeping with the relationship I'd hope to establish with the teacher partners in whom I wanted to find a connection. His research (2011) seemed more qualitative in nature. He writes to leadership ideas that speak of "equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity" (p. 28). "Partners do not decide for each other;" he states. "They decide together" (p. 29). I found renewal in these ideas and was drawn then to qualitative study and have mindfully worked since then to behave as a learning/leading partner with others at my school.

Dr. Kim first suggested narrative inquiry and autoethnography as a method of study. She believed passionately in the promise narrative held for researchers and practitioners alike. I interviewed one time for a job I didn't get, and the feedback I received was that this individual from human resources felt I was "too theoretical". This individual didn't think the way I talked about school, professional learning, and leadership would translate to most in schools. That feedback has never left me, and it has prompted many questions that I continue to wrestle with to

this day. “Theorizing is an intellectual activity that links lived experience to scholarship and practice,” says Kim (2016, p. 31). Yet, my experience has supported the axiom that there is little room for theory in the practice of school.

“We might say that if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). Dr. Kim was ultimately persuasive in her argument that a rendering of my lived experience as a building principal could contribute to the larger conversation about schools, school improvement, leading and learning. It is true, there seems an absence of literature related to the first-hand knowledge of principal’s professional lives. Wolcott’s (2003) ethnography of Edward Bell, *The Man in the Principal’s Office*, is an important, seminal contribution to this effort. Why then did I have to wait until my graduate studies to even know it existed? For that matter, why are my leadership colleagues denied the writing of Eisner (1998), Richardson (1994), Poulos (2012), Lincoln and Guba (2005), and Bochner (2001, 2003)? Few, if any, have even heard of Jim Knight (2011)! And his work is certainly much more mainstream and intended for a practitioner audience.

Regardless of the pull toward the practical, efficient, quantitative and technical, I have continued to stay the course with narrative. To Eisner (1998) “Qualitative inquiry, like conventional quantitative approaches to research, is ultimately a matter of persuasion, of seeing things in a way that satisfies, or is useful for the purposes we embrace” (p. 39).

Social situations are in a state of flux. This does not mean that conclusions drawn about schools, classrooms, teachers, or students have only a brief or fugitive life. It does mean that qualitative inquirers do not seek those universal, invariable, and eternal natural laws represented by the aims of physicists. Ours is a “softer” more malleable universe—or a collection of them. (Eisner, 1998, p. 39)

Seeing my professional role as a partner requires constant reflection and evaluation, scrutiny of things said, not said, and decisions made/not made. While school dilemmas could be researched using more traditional quantitative methods, I continue to see opportunity in appraisal of my praxis being one best explored qualitatively. Writing, storytelling, according to Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) provides me a way to address the discursive world of the administrator. “Because the individual is subject to multiple and competing discourses in many realms, one’s subjectivity is shifting and contradictory—not stable, fixed, or rigid” (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). My effectiveness resides in my willingness and capacity to continue to look within. Lincoln and Guba (2005) provide me with confidence I have made the appropriate turn. “The meaning-making activities themselves are of central interest to social constructionists/constructivists, simply because it is the meaning-making/sense-making/attributional activities that shape action (or inaction)” (p. 167). Poulos (2012) advocates for narrative and ethnographic work in his discussion of life interruptions or so-called “ruptures” (p. 323). His *Life, Interrupted* (2012) autoethnography is one I’ve turned to on numerous occasion (and have even attempted to distribute to colleagues a time or two). He offers profound insight in lived experience and the “constant companion” (p. 331) of doubt, tribulation, life’s trial and error. Our experiences need to be fleshed out, unearthed, discussed, grappled with as a means of making sense of our world and in the interest of personal and professional growth.

When an interruption occurs...perhaps it is time to remember the calling of the ethnographer—to look deeply, to search for pattern and meaning and significance and story...to find a way *into and through* the interruption, and thus into a living story that truly opens the way to *transcendence*... (Poulos, 2012, p. 331)

“I take my stand as an ethnographer,” he (Poulos, 2012) writes. “One who observes and participates, actively, consciously, mindfully—attempting to probe and interpret the deeper meanings of human experience” (p. 324). Indeed! “In the question to grasp the deeper meanings of phenomena, the attentive ethnographer notices that there are signs (openings?) in our world, if we will be attend to them” (p. 324). Narrative and story have then become my means of attending better to my lived experience as a principal, educator, professional, and human being.

### **Why narrative?**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provide context on the value of the narrative turn in research methods:

We are therefore not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced on a continuum—people’s lives, institutional lives, lives of things. Just as we found in our own lives embedded within a larger narrative of social science inquiry, the people, schools, and educational landscapes we study undergo day-by-day experiences that are contextualized within a longer-term historical narrative. (p. 19)

To think narratively is an exercise in boundary-thinking, recognition of one’s temporality.

When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29)

I am but a participant in the grand narrative. If I’m to contribute to the story, I must take aim at myself, challenge my convictions, push myself to the boundaries of what I have come to know to be true. Working with a poststructuralist lens permits this. “First, it directs us to understand

ourselves reflexively as persons writing from particular positions at specific times. Second, it frees us from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962).

Thinking narratively has required a thorough examination and reliance on related literature.

We are not here to make scholarly revolution singlehandedly. Thus, this is why we need to know the literature well: Knowing the literature that is available to us lets us construct our argument instead of wasting time doing what has already been done. (Kim, 2016, p 92)

To that end, I’ve strived to include, as a function of my research methodology, the significant and influential voices whose work has informed my own.

Bochner and Ellis (2003), for example, state,

As spectators, most of us are trained to look at art and ask, what do I see? But as a form of language, art can become reflexive, turn on itself, invite to question our own premises, to ask, how do I see? What can I know? How do I know what I know? (p. 508)

Certainly as my experience in the principalship continues to grow, so too does my knowledge-base. But the more I know, frankly, the more convoluted it all becomes. Thinking narratively provokes me to ponder, reflect, and regard differently my leadership behavior and decision-making. Bochner (2001) again:

We can call on stories to make theoretical abstractions, or we can hear stories as a call to be vigilant to the cross-currents of life’s contingencies. When we stay with a story, refusing the impulse to abstract, reacting from the source of our own experience and feelings, we respect the story and the human life it represents, and we enter into personal

contact with questions of virtue, of what it means to live well and to do the right thing. (p. 132)

To engage in narrative inquiry, we think narratively about both the phenomenon under study and the methodology through which we study experience. Thinking narratively, we attend to the commonplaces of narrative inquiry; temporality (past, present, future), sociality (the dialectic between inner and outer, the personal and social), and place (the concrete physicality of the place or places in which experiences are lived out and told). (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber & Orr, 2010, p. 83)

I have set out to try and understand better my professional context, that is to better know the professional and sometimes personal (is there a difference?) landscape in which I currently reside. Of course, the temporality of my current lived experience as a principal pays respect to where I've been, where I am now, and where I want to go. I am not a writer, however, and this research, turning to narrative captures well my *thinking*, but stretches me profoundly when it comes to actually capturing those thoughts in language and putting them down on paper.

“Postmodernism,” writes Richardson (1994), “claims that writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it—but only partially present, for in our writing we repress parts of ourselves, too” (p. 520). This, I've found, is the greatest challenge for me as a novice ethnographer, a researcher becoming. There is tremendous risk and vulnerability inherent in this form of research. I am laying out there for all to see, read, and feel my innermost professional (and personal) dilemmas. I've grown quite fond of and accustom to the necessary “face-work” (Poulos, 2012) required of the stoic, steadfast, and competent leader. Expressing misgivings, shortfalls, inadequacies to an audience of strangers is not something in which I'd otherwise willingly engage. However, I'm

resolute and convicted that this work can yield tremendous growth potential, should I just better attend to the “irruptions” (Poulos, 2012) that occur in my everyday life as a principal.

I am intrigued then, by the evocative narrative. This is the point at which I make the professional personal and vice versa. Years ago, I was introduced to Ronai’s (1995) “layered account” approach to ethnographic research. “A layered account is a postmodern ethnographic reporting technique that embodies a theory of consciousness and a method of reporting in one stroke” (p. 396). I have elected to borrow from this technique as a way to structure my narrative. Richardson (1994) supports this, offering, “experimenting with format is a practical and powerful way to expand one’s interpretive skills and to make one’s ‘old’ materials ‘new’” (p. 521).

*Amy is my new instructional coach. Vibrant, spunky, professionally put together, unabashedly honest in her approach to others—she’s equal parts tough-love and cheerleader. She often says, jokingly, that she should wear a t-shirt that reads, “I’m not for everyone.” While we’re still getting to know one another, it is clear we share a mutual interest in improving school culture and want to involve staff in the exercise of improvement.*

*I’ve created a comfortable space, off to the side, with a small table, some professional literature bound by two globe bookends, a little lamp. It is the night of parent conferences at school. On these evenings, I usually work to make my rounds, peeking in doorways to check on things, staying visible. Tonight, I have returned to my office and am settled into my little reading space, reading over a couple of articles that are shaping my thinking. This is where Amy finds me, as she enters my office.*

*“Hey, got a minute?” she asks. She has something on her mind, I can tell.*



*“Um, sure. Of course. I’m just reading. Actually, this is literature I think you’d find really interesting. It’s all about school culture and collaboration, that sort of thing.”*

*“Oh, I am interested! I really just came in because I wanted to express some frustration about how things are going in Right Work, particularly with a couple of grade levels.” Right Work is what we call our weekly team meetings. Many schools refer to these as “PLC” meetings, short for professional learning community. I prefer “Right Work”.*

*I remove my reading glasses and set my articles down. “I’m all ears, but it’s funny you mention that issue, because it’s very related, like I said, to the things I’m reading about.”*

*“Enlighten me,” she replies, with a blend of interest and obvious sarcasm.*

*“Ha. Well, first, what’s the issue with Right Work?”*

*“I don’t know, Steve. It’s like, with some teams, no one wants to take responsibility. And maybe that’s not fair. Aren’t you always saying that our sickest patients should see our most capable doctors? Well, I am trying to encourage that, trying to lead people toward those conclusions, but some just seem unwilling.” I can tell she is sharing this with some difficulty. I know being new anywhere is a challenge, but it’s particularly true here, and to serve in the role of teacher leader...well, that’s a tall order. I appreciate that she’s come to me and is expressing some vulnerability and interest in making an impact. Good indicator of the type of professional she is.*

*“You know, Amy. We’ve come a long way here at Broadmoor. You don’t have the luxury of knowing where we started. Sure, there are some things still yet in place, some attitudes that reflect a culture we’re trying to shift, but I think these folks are all starting to row in the same direction, as they say.”*

*I continue. “One of the articles I’m reading is called, ‘Improving Relationships Within the Schoolhouse’(Barth, 2006). Know it?”*

*“Nope,” she says with a shrug.*

*“It’s fascinating. This guy, Barth (2006), is a retired administrator, I believe. He also wrote a book I own. He just offers really interesting perspective, truths about leading and school culture. My favorite is this term he uses called ‘nondiscussables—important matters that, as a profession, we seldom openly discuss’.”(Barth, 2006, p. 1) He claims it is these nondiscussables that get in the way of true collaborative environments being formed. Actually, he refers to the optimal professional relationship as collegial (Barth, 2006, p. 3).*

*“Well, I think we’re collegial here at Broadmoor,” offers Amy. “I mean, some teams are anyway. Don’t you think?”*

*“Yeah, sure. Some teams here are really strong. But he really takes care to distinguish between congenial and collegial relationships (Barth, 2006). I think we’re more congenial. It speaks to climate, not culture. And I think there’s a difference. We’re friendly toward one another. We take care of each. Rally when someone needs it. And that’s really important, don’t get me wrong! But are we collegial? I think we’re making progress, but we’re not there yet.” I hand her a copy of the article. It has some of my highlights in it.*

*She looks it over, so I press on. “You see where he talks about rooting for one another? (Barth, 2006, p. 3). We don’t do that here.”*

*“You’re right,” nods Amy, not looking in my direction. A pause, then, “We’re too competitive.”*

*“Exactly!” I say. “And he talks about that too. I can’t remember how he refers to staff who are too competitive...”*

*“Adversarial,” Amy interrupts with the assist.*

*“Right. I think we’re part that, too. Don’t you? While there are times when I think we’ve really grown together, I wonder if it’s truly something that defines us, or if when push comes to shove, we are self-serving, and adult-centered in our approach.”*

*“Why do you think that is? What’s getting in our way, do you think? I mean, as you said, it’s not like these are new conversations. Broadmoor isn’t unique. This is my fourth building, and I can tell you, it’s the same everywhere,” Amy laments.*

*“Well, that brings me to these other pieces articles that I believe are really important. Required reading, frankly. One is about this idea of “threat rigidity.” (Olsen and Sexton, 2009) The other is about collaboration, and what we expect of teachers, and what research says we may not understand.”(Little, 1990). I open the first article, thumbing through the pages at the highlighted sections. Here, listen to this: (I read)*

*We found that on both levels, threat rigidity occurs in a number of similar ways; by centralizing and restricting the flow of information by constricting control, by emphasizing routinized and simplified instructional/assessment practices, and by applying strong pressure for school personnel to conform. (Olsen and Sexton, 2009, p. 14)*

*“They are talking about this idea that organizations behave in ways that are in response to outside factors and pressures placed on them,” I say. “And these factors can result in things like psychological stress, intergroup and intragroup difficulties, defensiveness/resentment, and a desire to hide one’s practice.” (Olsen and Sexton, 2009, p. 14)*

*“It says that? That’s really fascinating,” Amy admits. “Where did you get this article?”*

*“It’s something I’m reading for my dissertation. Relevant, though, huh?”*

*“I’d say.” I have her full attention.*

*“It’s a really long article,” I say, holding up a copy. “Most probably wouldn’t be interested in wading into something academic and so cerebral. Which is a problem I have with our profession.” This I add with an index finger point in the sky for emphasis. What a dork.*

*Amy smiles. She thinks I’m a dork too, I think.*

*Now I’m getting revved. “It goes on to talk about all sorts of fascinating, pertinent things. Teachers feeling like the principal favors newer teachers over later-career teachers, cynicism then from later-career teachers directed toward newer teachers, trust issues directed at principals, particular those new to the role.” (Olsen and Sexton, 2009)*

*“Like right here, it says that, ‘newer teachers were more receptive to peer support and administrative assistance, whereas midcareer and later-career teachers believed they had earned commensurate levels of control and freedom’.” (Olsen and Sexton, 2009, p. 33) These teachers actually equate autonomy with the hallmark of a strong professional. (Olson and Sexton, 2009)*

*“So, in other words, vets think that it’s almost a sign of weakness, or something, to collaborate, because it suggests you need help? Is that it?” I can tell Amy is considering recent grade Right Work conversations—what she said, how she structured the discussion, what she may have assumed or taken for granted.*

*“Yeah, that’s it exactly! And we just ignore this, right? We don’t even discuss these issues at the building, principal, or district level. It’s crazy, I think, because the research is right here!” I flick the paper for dramatics. Sighing audibly.*

*“And...and...,” I persist, “We aren’t also taking into account the nature of collaboration as a concept. Which is what this other article is all about.” I hold up the article, a little thinner*

*in stature, less intimidating. “This one is all about how teachers are naturally inclined to want to do their work independently. Collaboration then is something we have arbitrarily encumbered them with, and it’s a practice we as facilitators of professional learning and leadership believe to be important, but that your typical teacher doesn’t necessarily find a tremendous value in.” (Little, 1990)*

*“Right Work for who, then, huh?” Amy jokes.*

*“Yep.” I nod.*

*Turn the pages, I read, “‘A harder look is in order—at what might be meant by collaboration, at the circumstances that foster or inhibit it, and at the individual and institutional consequences that follow from it.’ (Little, 1990, p. 510) I’m searching for points that I believe are particularly salient and that struck me. I find one:*

*The primacy that we as researchers place on rational discourse may have led us to underestimate the cumulative and potentially rich effect of staff-room stories on teachers’ conceptions of their work. Despite paeans to teachers’ ‘practical knowledge,’ organizers of structured collaborations typically work to supplant teachers’ own talk with a ‘shared technical language’ derived from classroom research, learning theory, or other sources external to teachers’ immediate experience.e (Little, 1990, p. 514)*

*“English, please,” Amy scolds.*

*“In other words, I have talked to numerous teachers who say to me, ‘Steve, I don’t know why we have to meet every week. This is something we already do, all of the time!’ Of course, no it isn’t. At least not in the way you and I are likely defining it. But this research (Little, 1990) indicates that teachers find more value in the storytelling, impromptu conversations that occur at*

*lunch, or at recess. We tend to place little value on this type of teacher talk, but they feel differently.”*

*Amy considers this for a moment. I fill in the space.*

*“It goes on to say that true teacher interdependency is rare (Little, 1990). ‘Asked to specify essential relationships, those others without whom they simply could not do their work, teachers identified an average of one person; the average number of close consultative relationships was higher (about four).’ Basically, we are forcing these teams to come together to do work they don’t necessarily want to do together, with people they don’t necessarily altogether trust, or aren’t in their immediate circle. This, I think, is a really interesting idea. Do we ever even consider this when structuring, or even critiquing, the work teachers are doing in a “PLC”?” I say this with the proverbial finger air-quotes, indicating an almost tongue-in-cheek reference to something.*

*With a puzzled face, Amy says, “That is all really actually very interesting. Important. Why don’t more people have this information? I mean do have to be working on your dissertation to know it exists? Should you be sharing it with someone?”*

*“I am! I’m sharing it with you!” I grin.*

*“You know what I mean, someone important.”*

*I roll my eyes. “And there exposes the problem. Why would you believe you don’t count or aren’t important? It is very much in your control to make a difference and to influence the conversation. You should feel empowered to do so, frankly.”*

*Looking at the clock, Amy does a funny thing with her mouth like she’s considering saying something but debating on how best to form it. In the end, she seems to swallow whatever it was. She stands. “Well, this was real. Thanks!”*

*“Of course. Glad we did it.”*

*“Can you do me a favor? Send me articles like those that you think will help me do my job better. But more like the first one you mentioned, not the others with all of the tier-three vocabulary. Deal?”*

*I smirk, “I think you’re more than capable of tier-three vocabulary articles, but, yes, I’ll share anything I think you might find value in. You can choose what to read and what to discard.”*

*“Thank you,” Amy says, “Have a great rest of your night.” She turns and exits the office.*

*I have lots of thoughts running through my head. Of course, talking through the literature out loud helps one synthesize it better. So, that’s good. I’m also curious about what Amy said about with whom should this be shared. I think I’ll pass it on to a select group of principal buddies, maybe some folks in our curriculum and instruction department. Who knows? I’m also interested in why Amy thought she didn’t want to wade into research with tier-three vocabulary, as she said. What does that say about how teachers see themselves? What does it reveal about how accessible we make text to the people it’s supposed to impact? What does it say about how this important research is even reaching the landscape that should be most directly influenced?*

*I settle back into my chair. Highlighter at the ready and return to my learning.*

## **Autoethnography**

Electing to use autoethnography as my primary mode of inquiry, it was important I understood it as a narrative genre. Holman Jones (2005) says this of autoethnographic study: “Autoethnography works to hold self and culture together, albeit not in equilibrium or stasis.

Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement—between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement” (p. 764). She acknowledges autoethnography as a “blurred genre” (Gertz, in Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). It is equal parts autobiography, personal narrative, short story, memoir, even fiction. It is all of these and it is none of these exclusively.

The drama of representation, legitimation, and praxis is part of an ongoing dialogue between self and world about questions of ontology, epistemology, method, and praxis: What is the nature of knowing, what is the relationship between knower and know, how we share what we know and with what effect? (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 766)

Writing my principal story, sharing short narratives of experiences that strive to supply a reader a glimpse into the challenging world of leadership, with a specific focus on developing partnership, understanding trust, and evoking revelations about my professional evolvment, all seem best captured in first-person narrative. “We have looked to the personal, concrete, and mundane details of experience as a window to understand the relationships between self and other or between individual and community” (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 766). Speaking to the promise of autoethnography, the potential of storytelling, and the prospect of addressing questions of the self, culture, power dynamics, and the like, Holman Jones (2005) states, “these questions challenge us to create work that acts through, in and on the world and to shift our focus from representation to presentation, from the rehearsal of news ways of being to their performance” (p. 767).

Providing some clarification about autoethnography, and distinguishing it from autobiography and other first-person narrative writing, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) share the following:



As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. When writing an autobiography, an author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences. Usually, the author does not live through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document; rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight...most often, autobiographers write about ‘epiphanies’—remembered moment perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience, and events after which life does not seem quite the same...autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. (p. 2)

Is mine then an autobiography or an autoethnography? Am I not using past experience, and a “layered account” (Ronai, 1995) to tell my story? Where does the line separating the two end and begin? I would submit that my research departs from autobiography by virtue of the answering of the research questions I pose. I am seeking to contribute to a larger conversation about schooling, the paradigmatic nature of principal and teacher, issues of “threat rigidity” (Olsen & Sexton, 2009) that impact the work of establishing partnership in a field that desperately requires it.

The autoethnographer not only tries to make personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging, but also, by producing accessible texts, she or he may be able to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences that traditional research usually disregards, a move that can make personal and social change possible for more people. (Bochner,

1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; Hooks, 1994, in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Wall (2006) writes in *An Autoethnography on Learning About Autoethnography*, This is the philosophical open door into which autoethnography creeps. The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned. (p. 148)

Butz and Besio (2009) argue,

Autoethnographers are scholars who focus intensely on their own life circumstances as a way to understand larger social or cultural phenomena, and who often use personal narrative writing as a representational strategy that incorporates affect and emotion into their analyses. (p. 1665)

Mine is a narrative of self. I am venturing to shake the very foundation on which my professional, and personal, conscious resides. “Researchers use themselves as their own primary subjects, as they strive to understand some aspect of the world that involves but exceeds themselves” (Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1665).

Butz and Besio (2009) take care to identify an important attribute of what they refer to as “narrative ethnography” (p. 1666). In narrative ethnography the experiences of the author are encompassed in the description of events as a means of better understanding the group being studied (in my case, principals and teachers) (Butz & Besio, 2009).

The move from signifier to object of signification is less drastic in narrative ethnography than in personal experience narrative, because here researchers' own lives, emotions and experiences are not their primary objects of study. The point of narrative ethnography is primarily epistemological; it is a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyze how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships, and is a way to describe the situatedness and partiality of the academic knowledge that results. ( Butz & Besio, 2009, p. 1666)

Likewise, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) distinguish the multiple forms of autoethnography. "Narrative ethnographies" they write, refer to texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others. Here the emphasis is on the ethnographic study of others, which is accomplished partly by attending to encounters between the narrator and members of the group being studied. (Tedlock, 1991, in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 5)

In my case, I'm researching myself, inasmuch as I'm trying to better discern my lived story as it relates to the establishment of partnership (Knight, 2011), the evidence of "threat rigidity" (Olsen & Sexton, 2009), and the fostering of trust with school participants in a larger school culture. "Reflexive ethnographies", on the other hand, "document ways a researcher changes as a result of doing fieldwork. Reflexive/narrative ethnographies exist on a continuum ranging from starting research from the ethnographer's biography, to the ethnographer studying her or his life alongside cultural members' lives" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 5).

While some may argue that my research doesn't necessarily address grander themes of

race, feminism, critical theory, and the like, work that typically defines autoethnographic research, it does endeavor to speak to the educational milieu—a space and place where we all have a vested interest. The work of educators is vitally important to the very fabric of every one of our social institutions. It is a leveraging political talking point, it dominates issues related to government spending, and schools and schooling represent the great equalizer for many disenfranchised populations. Why then wouldn't research discovering ways in which we can better understand and make more effective such an important institution be of primary concern to all audiences?

### **Criticisms of Autoethnography**

As autoethnography takes on different forms and functions, the definition of it seems somewhat elusive. Is it too broad? Too inclusive? Are there rigorous criteria that should be consistently applied to deem research worthy autoethnographic work? A few researchers have weighed in on this argument.

Charmaz (2006) asks:

Is it personal reflection, memoir, autobiography, or autobiographical ethnography? Is it inclusive of all these various forms or is it a single genre? Has the term become something of a misnomer? What distinctions does it invoke? Who claims the name, who ignores it, and who disavows it? (p. 396)

Perhaps the most notable criticism is that of Leon Anderson (2006), in his article *Analyzing Autoethnography*. In the article, he provides a summary of his intentions that include sharing his thoughts on the nature of autoethnographic study and refining it as a research methodology. He also seeks to reach novice ethnographers who he recognizes are grappling with the “pull of various approaches to qualitative inquiry.” (p. 374). “My goal,” he states, “is to

clarify the potential practice and promise of an alternative to evocative autoethnography, one that is consistent with qualitative inquiry rooted in traditional symbolic interactionism” (Anderson, 2006, p. 374). Anderson (2006), is open in his denunciation of the evocative turn in autoethnographic study:

I applaud the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of these scholars for articulating a theoretical paradigm for the form of autoethnography that they promote and for producing and encouraging texts (and performances) that exemplify ethnography within this paradigm. But I am concerned that the impressive success of advocacy for what Ellis (1997, 2004) refers to as “evocative or emotional autoethnography” may have the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry. (Anderson, 2006, p. 374)

Paul Atkinson (2006), in response to Anderson (2006), echoes the concerns shared by his fellow researcher that autoethnography has lost its way.

The problem stems from a tendency to promote ethnographic research on writing on the basis of its experiential value, its evocative qualities, and its personal commitments rather than its scholarly purpose, its theoretical bases, and its disciplinary contributions. This in turn reflects a wider problem in that the methodological has been transposed onto the plane of personal experience, while the value of sociological or anthropological fieldwork has been translated into a quest for personal fulfillment on the part of the researcher. (pp. 402-403)

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) acknowledge the critics viewpoint that

autoethnography is often deemed lacking in rigor, theoretical substance and analysis. It is too “aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic.” (p. 6) Responding to the criticisms, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) assert, “These criticisms erroneously position art and science at odds with each other, a condition that autoethnography seeks to correct” (p. 6).

Wall (2016) speaks to the current state of autoethnography, greeting the polarized approaches of evocative and analytic autoethnographies (p. 1). “Despite the strong influence of postmodernism in contemporary qualitative inquiry, autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 1). “How much do we want to and need to put ourselves out there forever and for all?” she asks (Wall, 2016, p. 7).

What I wish to do...is draw attention to the middle ground, to encourage would-be autoethnographers to consider a balanced perspective that lies between the warring factions of evocative and analytic approaches to this method, one that captures the meanings and events of one life in an ethical way but also in a way that moves collective thinking forward. (Wall, 2016, p. 7)

Bochner (2001) lobbies for the evocative turn in narrative and autoethnography and acknowledges/concedes he’s not likely to persuade opposing viewpoints to feel differently. “When I’m done,” he writes, “Chances are they’re still going to believe what they’ve always believed, and so will their followers, and so will I, and so will most of you.” (p. 134) He writes, however, because he remains convinced that the narrative turn represents something larger and significant in the field (2001).

The narrative turn moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away

from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories. (Bochner, 2001, p. 135)

Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) in their entreaty to the evocative turn in narrative storytelling voice, “Writing personal stories thus makes ‘witnessing’ possible—the ability for participants and readers to observe, and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience. (p. 5) Vyran (2006) agrees, “Intensive self-immersion and the discoveries it may enable represents one of AA’s (analytic autoethnography’s) greatest potentials as a unique addition to our methodological toolkits.” (p. 407)

Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (2005) acknowledge, “Hard-line foundationalists presume that the taint of action will interfere with, or even negate, the objectivity that is a (presumed) characteristic of rigorous scientific inquiry.” (p. 175) I ask, however, is there not “action” inherent in the very ethnographic act of observing itself and thereby deeming something worthy of observation? I struggle, admittedly, with the continuum of analytic to evocative ethnography, knowing exactly where I want my research to reside, and whether or not structuring it in a certain way adds to or diminishes its overall credibility.

### **Validity, Credibility, Rigor, and Verisimilitude**

While it would appear the literature evidence suggests that credibility, validity, rigor and verisimilitude is largely determined based on what “camp” one subscribes to—evocative versus

analytic—there is still a great deal that should be taken into account with respect to how better to establish these important research aims.

“What stands as autoethnography remains unclear and contested,” Charmaz (2006, p. 397). Feldman (2003) says, “Issues of validity are important because when we engage in reflective processes that focus on ourselves (as in the construction of autobiographical narratives), we cannot be sure of the accuracy of what we see...Odes to ourselves are of little value to those whom we want to help.” (p. 27). Given this precept and given the fact that autoethnography potentially risks being too laden with narcissism and self-indulgence, researchers would be well-served striving to address issues that seek to take steps to more firmly establish rigor, trustworthiness, and authenticity.

Charmaz (2006), for example, argues that one way to accomplish this to be sure all voices are represented in the final rendering of the research study. “They imply that their described experience says something significant about the human condition. It might. Nonetheless, their descriptions may have serious limitations when their research does not take the perspectives of other participants into account.” (p. 398). Absorbing this point, I, of course, questioned how I could realistically address the issue of partnership development, school culture, trust considerations, and the telling of my story, without including the voice of the teachers with whom this whole effort seeks to ultimately impact.

“For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true.” (p. 8). A strong autoethnographer does not simply try to create/recreate stories that connect, conjure, and cohabit with readers. They want to contribute. As a means of addressing issues related to validity and rigor, the effective



autoethnographer asks, “How useful is the story?” and “To what uses might the story be put?” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 9).

Lapadat (2017) argues for a “collaborative autoethnographic” approach to research. This, she contends, will address inherent issues related to validity, reliability, and rigor. By having multiple voices contribute to an autoethnographic study, assurances can be made that a devotion to different points of view occurs. Feedback, reflection, and self-criticism likely will enhance the research product. Ellis, Bochner, Rambo, Berry, Shakespeare, Gingrich-Philbrook, Adams, Rinehart, and Bolen (2017) use a collaborative approach in their “multivoiced autoethnography.” “Stories such as these provide a collective consciousness and offer the possibility of initiating important conversations about the values of care and empathy associated with the project of autoethnography” (Ellis, et.al., 2017, p. 120). Even this method has its shortcomings, as Ellis (Ellis, et.al., 2017) accepts,

In living [the] experience and telling [the] story, I felt limited in being able to enter other’s consciousness or in figuring out how they perceived what had happened. As an autoethnographic storyteller, I can only be in my subjectivity, not in the subjectivity of others. (p. 130)

Feldman (2003) provides a list to evaluate self-study in the pursuit of greater validity, reliability and rigor:

1. Provide clear and detailed description of how we collect data and make explicit what counts as data in our work.
2. Provide clear and detailed descriptions of how we constructed the representation from our data.

3. Extend triangulation beyond multiple sources of data to include explorations of multiple ways to represent the same self-study.
4. Provide evidence of the value of the changes in our ways of being teacher educators.

If we want others to value our work, we need to demonstrate that it is well founded, just, and can be trusted. By making our inquiry methods transparent and subjecting our representations to our own critique, as well as that of others, we can do so. (Feldman, 2003, p. 28)

Sparkes (2000) assumes a different stance, essentially arguing that autoethnography represents a completely different and altogether unique method to narrative and ethnographic research. To subject it to traditional criteria is missing the essence of what it seeks to accomplish. “Needless to say, when standard, traditional criteria of what makes a good sociological telling are applied, the autobiographic will always disappoint.” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 28). It’s illogical and inconsistent, he maintains, to impose criteria that runs against the grain of what the autoethnographer works to achieve. “Attempts to do so are, at best, misguided and, at worst, arrogant and nonsensical, a form of intellectual imperialism that builds failure in from the start so that the legitimacy of other research forms is systemically denied” (p. 29). A better model, he suggests, would be to “view alternate forms of inquiry in terms of their process and products...so that each could be judged using criteria that are consistent with their own internal meaning structures” (p. 29).

Bochner (2018) similarly rejects the imposition of criteria that renders a verdict with respect to validity, reliability, and verisimilitude in self-study. “The only rule of rigor to which we submit is the rigor of sentences and the discipline of labor necessary to produce autoethnographies, performances, documentaries, essays, and other forms of expression that are artful, absorbing, ethical, and honest” (Bochner, 2018, p. 366).

## **Process for the Stories to be Included**

As stated previously, this research borrows from Ronai's (1995) "layered account" approach to autoethnography. Strategically placed throughout the first three chapters (Introduction, Literature Review, and Methodology), the short narratives included are intended to transport the reader into my lived experience as a building principal. As my areas of focus include the pursuit of partnership (Knight, 2011), school culture improvement (Deal & Peterson, 2009) and the variables associated with trust in schools (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow & Lemahieu, 2015; Bryk, Gomez & Grunow, 2011; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995; Kochanek, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), I have worked to include narratives that have been created and reconstructed to illustrate instances where these areas are exposed, either directly or indirectly.

Included are stories from encounters with colleagues. Some were created as soon as they happened, some recreated days later, constructed from notes and recollection of the event as I believed it to take place. In some cases, I have found value in supporting the narratives with literature; in other cases, I have experimented with having the narratives stand alone. In some cases, I have edited the sentence structure and grammar, in others, allowed the language to be shaped by my stream of consciousness. Some vignettes are more situated in an analytic frame of mind, considerations made and insinuated about the principalship, the nature of relationships in schools, school dynamics, etc. Some vignettes are just me—windows into what was shaping my thinking at that specific moment in time. Some are likely more interesting than others. And some were certainly far more difficult to write.

I am also striving, as a means of this research, to grow professionally and personally. To that end, included reflections that are honest, vulnerable, and authentic hope to better connect the

reader to me as the author. But how vulnerable do I get? How much do I show? What do I risk? How far do I want my writing to veer toward the evocative? “The pull of reveal may also entice the student into revealing as much and as painful as she can in order to achieve a sense of vulnerable self” (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009, p. 29). Where do I ultimately land on the continuum that extends between researcher-*and*-researched and researcher-*is*-researched? (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). I, like the subject of Doloriert and Sambrook’s (2009) research, am a “social construction tourist”, a novice ethnographer, one who stands on very unsteady ground, moving down paths largely yet untrodden.

While some autoethnographers seek to provide ethical consideration for the “us” in narrative, Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) want to ensure care and compassion are extended to the “I” in research. “It is a complex moral and ethical minefield,” (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009, p. 39). Flemons and Green (2002, p. 93) refer to as “outing” (in Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009, p. 39). In other words, you have to decide if you are ready to put yourself out there in such a way that you are truly exposed and vulnerable, susceptible to scrutiny and criticism, and consider the impact on personal identity (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). Should I reveal more to add verisimilitude? Does adding too much of the personal distract from the writing or enhance it? As the writing changes its tenor and tone, does my style adapt along with it? Reporting is one thing, taking risks with language, story, fictionalization of accounts for dramatic effect, writing as performance, these are an altogether different endeavor. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) actually interrogates questions of reliability, commensurability, legitimacy when fiction enters into a researcher’s autoethnographic writing.

“Using self as a subject is not a problem for me,” writes Wall (2006), “But how self is used is very important.” (p. 156). Wall (2006) argues for a cautious walk into autoethnography and self-study, with respect paid to principled, disciplined choices.

“We live in a time of great possibility; let us proceed wisely.” (Wall, 2006, p. 158).

Easier said than done.

*I'm driving and my phone begins to ring. It's early. Still dark outside. My morning commute. I see it is a teacher from my school. He has been battling an unknown illness for the first few months of the year. He has had to step away several times, for periods of unexpected lengths. I miss the call. A text: Steve, please call me. It's very important. I let out a sigh, knowing this call has something to do with the doctor's appointment he had yesterday.*

*Dialing his cell phone, it rings a few times before he answers. "Steve. Good morning. Thank you for calling me back so quickly. I apologize for the early hour." He sounds tired, down-trodden.*

*"Of course, Mike. How are you today? You sound tired."*

*"Well, I got some news yesterday. Some important news, and I need to share it with you."*

*"I knew you had an appointment. Did you learn anything?" I can feel it coming. The news.*

*"It's a lot worse than what they expected. We were hoping for a different outcome. The doctors have been optimistic, as have I, but the most recent evaluation didn't come back the way we'd hoped. It appears I have pancreatic cancer. Stage 4."*

*Holding the phone to my ear, I'm conscious of how quiet it is in my car. Only the sound of the road. I choose to say nothing, instead letting the silence between us speak for me.*

*After a few moments, Mike continues.*

*"So, obviously, we're going to need to begin aggressive treatments immediately. I'll need to step away from school for quite some time. While I'm hopeful to return sometime this school year, I cannot foresee myself being able to juggle my responsibilities at school and attend to the treatments the doctors are prescribing."*

*Mike. Always the professional. Poised and graceful. Intelligent, soft-spoken. I suppose there's some obligation required here given that I'm the principal. But I'm thinking to myself, who in the hell cares about school at a time like this?*

*"Mike." A pause. "I'm so sorry. Of course, I understand. We'll take care of everything, rest assured. The last thing you need to concern yourself with is school stuff."*

*"Thank you. That means a lot," he says. His voice cracks subtly, audibly.*

*"How do you like your doctors and medical team?" This is all that came to my mind. After I say it, I realize it's a ridiculous question. I concede that Mike will surely be met with a litany of clumsy responses like this. I'm hoping to get a pass.*

*"Yes. Yes, they've all been great. Very encouraging, despite the heavy nature of what they discovered."*

*"Well, that's good," I reply. "So, what's next? What do you need from me?"*

*"That's mostly why I called. Well, I of course wanted you to know. I consider us friends. But I want to discuss how you think we should handle communication with the staff, parents, and of course my students."*

*Right. Mike teaches second grade. Thinking of those innocent faces. Teachers are invincible to them. Super heroes. They don't get sick. They don't die. The enormity of the news becomes a veritable presence in the car with me.*

*"Obviously, Mike, that's up to you. This is your story to tell. You need to tell me what you'd like shared, the manner in which it's shared, and when you feel comfortable sharing it."*

*"Thank you. That's what I had hoped for. I think for right now I'd like to keep this in my immediate circle. Until I know more, anyway. I am going to write up a statement. Would you please share that with the staff and the parents?"*

*"Yes. Absolutely. Whatever you need, Mike."*

*"Steve, thanks for all of the understanding. I know my absences have placed additional stress on the staff and the daily business of things. I've been missing you guys. Missing my class, especially."*

*"Goodness, Mike. I'm sure you do. Know you're missed too. Everyone just cares so much and want to know how best to help. Don't worry about any of the school stuff. We're your school family. We're here. We rally." At this, my voice catches.*

*"Right. I know that...Ok, well, I'd better be going. I have some other phone calls to make. Thank you again for the time this morning, Steve. Apologies for the phone call at such an early hour."*

*"Mike, please take care. There is nothing you can't ask of us right now. Remember that."*

*"I know that, Steve. Broadmoor is my most special place. I know they'll be there for me throughout all of this. Let's plan to talk soon."*

*"Yes, Mike. Talk soon."*

*The call ends.*

*As I pull into my spot at school, a grim reality strikes me that I'm going to have to silently carry this knowledge of Mike's situation. I will honor his request and allow him to share things in his own time. When in principal school do they teach you to handle such burdens? I will be required to go on conducting my daily business as a principal, responsible for the temperature of the building, all while operating with this knowledge that a member of our family is going through something unbearable. My observable behavior and positive outlook on all-things-Broadmoor have remarkable influence on the culture of our school. This is the reality of leadership. Being human is usually not permitted in my work. Too many are counting on me.*

*I walk in and greet everyone a good morning. I step into my office and quietly shut the door behind me.*

*Cancer.*

*Stage 4.*

*As principal, I'm frequently reminded of Poulos (2012) and this discussion of something referred to as face work. "As Erving Goffman (in Poulos, 2012) pointed out, much of our everyday communicative energy is aimed toward 'face work'—the intricate and involved maintenance of a positive social image." (p. 324)*

*I brew myself a cup of coffee and sit there with it, watching the steam rise in twists, not drinking it, but letting the warmth of the mug hug my hands.*

*A knock on the window. I look up and see the secretary. Through the glass, her mouth says in apology, "Sorry. I need you."*

*I nod and smile. Affirmation that I hear her and am coming. Time for face-work.*

*I realize I've not even taken my coat off.*



*I stand a bit unsteadily, removing my coat and throwing it over my chair. Steps toward my office door. I take the handle and turn it.*

*Why do we write? It seems there are critics of narrative and autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006), in particular, who feel there is little room for this sort of narrative revelation in the telling of one's story. I'm supposed to be writing to contribute to the larger professional conversation around leading and the principalship, scholarship around education and policy. A 'no vacancy' sign blinks at me...*

*The critics seem to believe an escape to trauma-sharing in the social sciences somehow clouds the boundary of what is/is not rigorous research and writing. But, again I ask, why do we write? Surely, we can all concede that we write when we feel compelled to do so. That may not be the only reason, but it's the best one. "We enter," says Poulos (2012), "if only for a brief while, into a greater awareness of the numinous (mysterious, spiritual, or supernatural) aspect or realm of the 'great reality' that encompasses but somehow transcends ordinary, everyday being"(p. 323). Life, and it's experiences, the indubitable cocktail of ups and downs, sharp corners, and unsuspected/unforgiving heartbreak and loss, all accumulate to a person feeling that theirs is a story worth telling—if for only trying to find themselves significant in a world that can often seem to have momentarily discarded their purpose in it.*

*So, why the inclusion of this narrative? I wrestle, honestly, with being explicit about its inclusion, at the risk of not giving the reader enough credit to know why. In this case, I suppose I wanted to illustrate that leadership is a human enterprise, at its core. The school business, in fact, is no different than any other organization, in this respect. Amid all of the other competing asks and wants of the job, serving as the principal requires also knowing that life doesn't stop.*

*There are times, like this situation with my dear friend and colleague, Mike, that something different is asked of me, something for which no amount of training, book reading, or experience can really prepare. It's humbling in a way that no one really can appreciate until you live it yourself. While no one has unrealistic expectations of me, most likely, working through impossible situations like these, handling them with professionalism, care, deference and transparency, is the expectation. My response is public, scrutinized. It's at once not about me as it is also a lot about me.*

*As I continue with my research, exploring aspects of school climate and community, recognizing and reflecting on ways in which I build trust with staff, I pay closer attention to these types of episodes, as they have a consequential impact on how we work alongside one another, as a cohesive unit.*

*As a family.*

## Chapter 4 - Play Ball!

*A few years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Wrigley Field in Chicago. What a remarkable experience! The whole place is steeped in history, with the hallways and tunnels filled with nostalgia and memorabilia. Ernie Banks at the plate. The omnipresence of the famed, bespectacled Cubs announcer, Harry Caray. It's a haven for the traditions of the sport, and a mecca for any die-hard baseball fan. In many ways, I've decided Broadmoor is like Wrigley Field. It's like a living museum and you don't want to touch a thing.*

*I remember I was sitting next to a season ticket holder that day at the game, making small talk prior to the first pitch, as he inquired from where I was visiting. Expressing to him how excited I was about finally coming to Wrigley, he seized the platform to share some of how he was feeling about the changes he observed at one of his favorite places on earth. Donned in a frayed Cubs ballcap and jean jacket, beer in one hand, it was interesting to hear him talk about the things he wished they'd not done to modernize the ballpark. "And then they put in the stadium seats across the way. You see that? What an eyesore!", and, "Then, it was the lights!", "And now they want to put in a jumbotron? Gimme a break!" I listened, respectfully, as he wasn't really talking to me, but rather was grateful, it seemed, to have the opportunity to air his spectator grievances. The Cubs' owners likely assumed fans desired a more updated ballpark--clean seating areas, wider walkways, lights, more ways to participate and view the game. I didn't say so at the time, but recall thinking that some of what this old guy was lamenting was in response to changes that other ballparks had implemented a long time ago—Wrigley, then, the hold-out against some of what others had apparently accepted much sooner and with greater readiness. These amendments to the sacred grounds of Wrigley were surely all deliberate ends to improve the fan experience. But there I was talking to a fan, a fan who continues to spend his*

*money and time invested in an organization that, regardless of their record and success, he's pledged his allegiance, and he was essentially expressing, "It's all well and good, but, frankly, I wish they'd have asked me, first!"*

*When I arrived at Broadmoor, some six years ago, there was a weathered large banner hanging outside the school that read, "National School of Excellence, 1994". Many of the staff who were part of that accomplishment still call Broadmoor their home. Since my arrival, over a six-year period that has gone so, so quickly, I've been the guy assigned to come in and change systems, identify areas of improvement, implement technology, adhere to new district initiatives, and recommend changes to update the facility. All of that is literally, in some cases, changing the face of the school as many once knew it. Here I am six years in, and it stills feels at times, like I'm a guest just passing through. In my baseball metaphor, I'm the new owner or manager, charged with assessing the current culture, and taking hedge-trimmers to it. The Broadmoor identity does not appear to reflect altogether my stamp, and I certainly don't feel I am Harry Caray to the halls of our school.*

*Broadmoor, like Wrigley Field, is a unique place. There's so much tradition in the form of celebrations, school songs, community events, etc. As a result of its years of achievement, it's largely been insulated from change initiatives that have found their way into other schools, places, for example, where I've been and have found success. But accompanying the charming qualities in the form of cultural traditions, the instructional practices had also gone largely untouched. Homework and discipline practices, for example, are aspects that have proven particularly, stubbornly intransigent, and represent continued challenges for me as a principal.*

*The "this works for me" mentality is very well-entrenched and alive and well with some at Broadmoor. You see it manifest in staff participation in grade level conversations,*

*relationships with other adults, a willingness to share and collaborate, rapport with students who may find school difficult, and often lack of reception to new ideas and practices.*

*Like the fan at Wrigley, however, you begin to understand a bit the source of that behavior if you appreciate and recognize that many associate their Broadmoor experience with the achievement and notoriety the school received in the past. That banner (which I removed shortly after my arrival), for example, was left there for a reason. It's difficult then to remind individuals with whom I work that much of that success was more than twenty years ago! The staff has changed, the landscape of education, the expectations of the profession and the professionals within it.*

*I know, however, that some resistant to change initiatives are dubious, perhaps not because of the initiative itself, whatever it may be, but rather that they associate their success and identity as successful educators with a time before now, a time when their teaching style, perhaps, and professional disposition of the collective were a synchronous fit with the educational milieu. With teaching being such a personal expression of oneself, I've often observed, it's understandable (and important) to acknowledge that shifts in the profession aren't always necessarily challenged or met with resistance because of one's inherent personal qualities, but rather because they represent a challenge to the professional identity of the individual.*

*Hopefully, it's not me then that staff may have an issue with, necessarily, it's what I represent. Such is the nature of the position, the walking of the knife's edge, working to honor the culture that you inherit as a principal, while striving to push/pull everyone collectively forward.*

*Anthony Muhammad, in his book, Transforming School Culture (2018), identifies four types of staff members in a school. “The Fundamentalists,” he argues, “preserve the status quo. They were successful as students (or teachers) in the traditional school culture, and they resent any attempts to change it.” (Kindle Edition, location 168) These individuals, according to Muhammad (2018), represent a real challenge for building leaders, as they are, in his opinion, prone to thwarting a principal’s attempt to improve the school culture and implement initiatives in the interest of the school. I think prior to being introduced to Knight’s (2011) partnership approach, I would have felt the “fan experience” was exclusively the students and parent community we serve. However, like the dedicated Cubs fan I encountered that day at Wrigley, I have to remember that teachers reside at Broadmoor, too. I wonder about the so-called “fundamentalist” teachers, and the real motivation behind their behavior. They certainly aren’t the enemy. That’s a lazy, unfounded, misguided (albeit popular!) leadership mindset to assume. The ownership they feel for Broadmoor, their identity found within it, is something I must pay serious respect to as I work to lead change.*

*In the book So Much Reform, So Little Change, author Payne (2008) provides this important perspective:*

‘Resistance’ is an accusation, not a description. It normalizes the reformers’ point of view and withdraws validity from the teachers’. The implication is that we have all these good ideas and programs, but teachers just resist doing them. Teacher skepticism is less judgmental and probably comes closer to expressing how teachers feel about what they are doing. Given that teachers have a clear understanding of the limited capacity of the district, given that they have lived through any number of programs that were going to fix everything, given what they know about the very real limitations of reformers, it is

perfectly sensible for teachers to be skeptical of this year's snake oil. Given the historically weak performance of most reforms, teachers would have to be fools to get all excited over every idea that comes down the pike. Indeed, by not cooperating with change, teachers may feel that they are protecting their students from additional disruption of their learning. (p. 80)

*I wonder sometimes how often administrators are quick to judge and label, mistakenly, teacher behavior as "resistance," without stopping to really consider what may be the root cause. Actually, I wonder how often I have judged and labeled. How has that behavior shaped relationships, trust, and the opportunity for any new program or initiative to have staying power?*

*Wrigley Field has undergone some serious structural changes that are intended to improve the fan experience and likely came as a result of shifting trends and input from those with a stake. I appreciate that our school has in it dedicated professionals that are steadfastly committed to the well-being of our culture and the success of our students, their colleagues, and our school community, but who may be thinking, "I just wish they'd have asked me, first!" Partnership, then, only results when one takes the time to hear from all stakeholders, assuming the positive, optimistic position that all have a vested interest in the success of the organization. Behavior that seemingly runs counter to that, isn't always what it may appear.*

*Play ball.*

...

I thought of many ways in which to present this critical chapter in my dissertation work. I needed to somehow capture my learning journey, while connecting dots for the reader, establishing some relevant context, and apply my learning/research to real-life work in my

school. Things have shifted at Broadmoor Elementary, as is often predictably the case in schools. As a school staff, we started in earnest with the Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) model, but had trouble sustaining the momentum with some of what was originally established. (This, I'll explore in greater detail in this chapter.) We have since moved to another broad-scale school initiative that I believe holds similar promise for us and is a nice working complement to the aspects of school culture and relationship-building I had hoped to establish with Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) when I arrived at Broadmoor six years ago.

Utilizing then a combination of analytic and evocative autoethnography, with a structure inspired by Ronai's (1995) "layered account" writing method, this chapter will document our staff journey of implementing this new school initiative.

## **The Proposal**

*Instead of meeting in my office, I told Erin I'd meet in her room. When I enter, I find her seated at the crescent table she uses for small group instruction. Her room is organized, colorful, vibrant. Student desks arranged in groups of four, promoting the collaborative environment that is a hallmark of her classroom.*

*"Hi!" she says with a warm smile. Erin is unflappably kind, professional, and positive. I remember when I hired her that some on the staff interview committee had wanted me to lean a different direction. Erin is on the short list of my favorite hires ever, and she has proven my instincts on her right on many occasions.*

*"Hey, there," I reply. I find a stool at the table. "So, what are you thinking?"*

*"Well, there's a lot of excitement from the staff, Steve. Really. And you know our group. Getting them to rally around anything like this is actually pretty remarkable."*



*“Yeah, I know. That’s why I want to be sure I’m showing support. I can sense something about this. It just feels different. I love the positivity and energy. Particularly from some who are not accustomed to getting involved like that.”*

*We are sitting down to discuss the prospects of an exciting new school initiative—“Be a Leader!” (pseudonym)—that seeks to provide and develop leadership in students and staff. The program, one that comes with a fairly hefty price tag, promotes the idea that anyone can be a leader. It endeavors to establish a school culture where staff deliberately focus on leadership and facilitates structures and opportunities where students and adults in the school can more actively participate in the decision-making process. At this point, we are just in the initial discussion and fact-finding phase of the work.*

*Erin pulls out a folder with some materials and notes. She removes a paper with a sketch of a scheduled timeline. “So, I’ve been thinking, and here’s a possible plan.” She hands me the paper. “It’s up to you, of course, but I think this may work to get as many involved as possible.”*

*I look the paper over. “You want to start with a summer book study, huh?” I read this and look up, nodding in affirmation. “I like that idea. Voluntary, of course. That’s important. Well, I’m happy to buy a copy of the book for any staff member interested.” Be a Leader! has many associated resources, one of which is a book that outlines some of the central tenets of the program, provides real-life accounts from schools that have adopted it, and discusses implications for schools considering future purchase and implementation. I’ve read the book. It’s an accessible read, in my opinion, optimistic, and will have obvious appeal to teachers, particularly at the elementary level.*

*“I think it should start with a book study, don’t you? That’s what was exciting for me, anyway. You sharing that book with me. That’s what got me interested.”*

*I had heard of Be a Leader! in my time as principal. Several schools where professional acquaintances work have implemented it and have had nothing but positive reviews. Knowing this, I had recommended the book to some of the staff at Broadmoor.*

*Erin continues. I can tell she's encouraged. "So, I'm thinking that I'll send out an initial welcome email to everyone. I can invite them to participate in the summer book study and can give them tentative dates. I think it would be neat if we could arrange it so that we could meet at someone's house. Like mine, or Sara's. She's always interested in hosting a staff party."*

*"Yeah, off campus is best for something like this, for sure. So, you all read the book. Then what?" I query.*

*"Well, not sure yet. I guess maybe we just meet and see what comes of it. The book study can either inspire us to start some things at Broadmoor, or maybe we'll decide it's too much to take on. You can at least endorse the book study and start to the conversation, right?" she asks.*

*"Oh, absolutely!" I say. "Like I said, there seems to be a lot of energy around this right now. I want to help in any way I can. I think it matches some of our existing building goals and really may serve as a nice means of aligning some of the other things we've started. No, I think it's great. And kudos to you for sort of spearheading things. You are the right person for the job. The staff thinks a lot of you. I am certain that because the invite is coming from you, you're likely to receive a far more positive staff response."*

*"Well, I wanted to talk to you about that," Erin says, somewhat hesitantly, as though she's not quite sure how to phrase what's next. "To what extent, at least initially, I mean, do you think you should be involved?"*

*I shift in my seat. "What do you mean?"*

*“I guess, I’m asking if you think we should do this book study just as a staff, or should it be orchestrated by you. Do you think there’d be value in us just doing it together? So, it doesn’t seem like a district or Steve initiative?” You can see that while she is being sincere with this question, she’s certainly not altogether sure how I’m going to receive it.*

*“Hmm.” I pause. Puzzled, but considering. “I guess I can see that. I know sometimes there are initiatives that are not well-received, particularly if they’re perceived as top-down. That whole ‘people aren’t motivated by other people’s goals’ thing.... So, yeah. Sure. Why don’t you go that route, first? See what response you get.”*

*“You sure?”*

*“Yeah...yeah. I’m sure. But I will say that you do realize moving forward, you’ll need my full participation and visible support? I’m all for some organic professional development, but I don’t want to be uninvolved to the point staff don’t believe I’m endorsing the work. Does that make sense?”*

*“Oh, of course! I totally get it,” she says. “And I certainly am not suggesting that we will do any of this without you. We will have to have your input and support. I just wonder, with this initial book study, if we might get more involvement if this is seen as a staff thing and not a district-mandated thing.”*

*I notice the time. “Ok, got it. Hey, so I’m going to scoot on out. Why don’t you cc me on the email you send to the staff about the book study? I’ll promote it in newsletters and whatnot. We’ll see what sort of traction it generates. Ultimately, I’ll need to know how many books to purchase, so the sooner you get a head count, please let me know.”*

*“Will do,” she says, gathering up the materials to return to the folder. “Thanks, Steve, for this opportunity. I’m excited and I think the staff is too. I really appreciate your support.”*

*“It’s good stuff. I think it all could be a really nice fit for us. You and I have heard often enough that things can feel disjointed. I think maybe a program like this can bring everything and everyone into better focus. I’m really excited. And thanks for your leadership. It’s not always easy taking on a role like this, but I want to support you in that too. Let me know how I can help.”*

*Smiling. “Thank you,” she says.*

*I exit her room feeling encouraged about the energy, but with some questions as to why it would be necessary to exclude me. I’m going to have to think on that.*

...

I’m reminded of Seligman’s (1997) discussion of trust. He says, “Trust then involves a vulnerability occasioned by some form of ignorance or basic uncertainty as to the other’s motives” (Seligman, 1997, Kindle location 275-276). Would the concern about motive be more likely with my presence at the Be a Leader! book club meetings? Seligman (1997) outlines trust as a product, at least in part, of institutions and expectations of role-incumbents. “The more roles one is enmeshed in, the greater potential for structurally determined dissonances and conflicts between, as well as differentials in power among, different status members” (Seligman, 1997, Kindle location 419). This is important, I think. Essentially, Seligman (1997) is arguing that within organizations, institutions exist. These institutions are patterns of behavior exhibited by role-incumbents, or actors in the particular system. Informed by previous experience, we, as the actors, all have roles we naturally fall into. If this is true, was Erin especially astute in working to, at least initially, separate me from the early stages of adopting Be a Leader!? Would the energy around this program and its potential for Broadmoor be negatively influenced because of our role-incumbent tendencies? Would staff immediately want to know my motives,

prompting them to engage with the material (and one another) in a less authentic way?

Similarly, would I run the risk of unwittingly assuming my role-incumbent tendencies as principal and influence the outcome of this initial effort?

With this in mind, I think I'm going to agree with Erin. We're going to let this first step of the book study just take shape without my influence. I'll encourage participation, I'll ensure resources are available. I've gotten the conversation started and placed Erin in a position of influence. We're going to have faith that is enough for a good start.

...

When teachers trust their principal, they are more willing to put in higher levels of effort into their teaching, try new innovations in teaching, and collaborate more to solve the challenging problems of schooling, all of which relate to productive and healthy school environments and positive changes in student outcomes. (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015, p. 260)

In their article, Leis and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) outline specific actions related to the expansion of teacher-principal trust. "Relational trust is not static. Trust is an emotional phenomenon, which can be 'altered instantaneously with a simple comment, a betrayed confidence, or a decision that violates the sense of care one has expected of another'" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998, p. 335, in Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Given the nature of trust, specific principal actions then can influence how it is developed with teachers.

Leis and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) identify three critical principal actions that engender trust. First, a principal can acknowledge existing conflict with staff. Principals in their study found success identifying issues teachers had with school decisions, making time to openly address them in a faculty meeting, and sought feedback about how to attend to similar issues in

the future. Second, principals who make prioritizing relationships a primary focus were able to engender more trust with teachers (Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). This seems obvious, but their research submits that this is not something that comes about without deliberate actions on the part of the principal. Due, in part, to the hierarchal nature of the teacher-principal dynamic, a principal cannot assume teachers will take the necessary steps to garner a positive relationship. Therefore, it is incumbent on the principal to create space and time for the building of relationships with staff. Third, Leis and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) assert that trust will more likely be established when the principal involves teachers in opportunities for shared decision-making. Making use of the valuable people resources in the school was found to be paramount to trust-building. However, the study showed that while most principals maintain they support shared-decision making with teachers, not all demonstrate consistency in creating opportunities for this to take place.

Considering the findings of this article, it prompts me to reflect on recent decision-making at Broadmoor. I know, for example, that there are staff with whom I have a stronger relationship than others. In some situations, in fact, my relationship with certain teachers is so fatigued it gets in the way of us working together productively. It causes me to filter their behavior in certain ways, and certainly influences how I, in turn, communicate and behave toward them. The research findings in Leis and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) establish that situations like these are likely common for teachers and principals, but that the responsibility to correct it largely lies with the principal. Likewise, I don't always take time to openly address conflicts that I hear about. It is not uncommon for staff to confide in me, or for me to hear reverberations of discontent about something. Unfortunately, (is it a lack of courage?) I don't always take the time to address these situations with staff. This obviously permits the festering of hard feelings and

frustration. I must realize that it is more likely the case that these things are not going to self-correct. Deliberate principal response is required.

Where I do feel validated is in the area of shared decision-making. Whether it be through the formation of my building leadership team, the soliciting of staff input on decisions, or involving staff in the hiring process, I always strive to be transparent, and instill in staff the opportunity for shared leadership. The question, of course, is do staff perceive me similarly? If asked about opportunities for shared decision-making, would they list this as a strength of Broadmoor and of my leadership? Perhaps there is potential for additional exploration and consideration of this.

### **Summer Progress**

My understanding, communicated via texts and emails, is that the summer book study is being very well-attended, and there's much excitement around Be a Leader! Staff are meeting at Sara's house, as proposed by Erin. It's an informal, breakfast-style, non-threatening exploration of the book and those participating are really enjoying themselves. I've been at Broadmoor for six years and have not seen this group of teachers so adrenalized about a new initiative! Erin has emailed me several times with specifics discussed at the book club meetings. There's already been talk about how best to use our first days of scheduled professional learning, for example. And they are making plans to decorate the building with leadership-inspired posters, bulletin boards, etc.

What is so encouraging for me is the list of names that appear on the attendance sheet for the meetings. There are staff members attending the Be a Leader! book chats that can often be observed unengaged and listless during staff meetings, or who may conveniently call in sick on days designated for professional learning.

Similar to what was working to be achieved with Impact Schools (Knight, 2011), *Be a Leader!* requires the empowerment of teachers and necessitates more opportunities for shared-decision making at the school. Knight (2011) says, “Those taking the partnership approach recognize that professional learning needs to value the opinions of all participants, not just those of the change leader. In fact, learning is significantly limited unless everyone’s voice is encouraged and heard” (p. 34).

The entire premise of *Be a Leader!* works with this idea in mind. The partnership approach speaks to a necessary leadership disposition and compels me to create authentic opportunities for teacher involvement in the culture-building and improvement efforts at Broadmoor. I need to walk-the-talk, so to speak, and see the value in a diverse set of opinions. When it comes to professional learning and school improvement, teacher voice is invaluable and should carry equal weight. Knight (2011) reminds us that inequality, as it relates to the inherent relationship between principal and teacher, is only structural.

Indeed, if principals confuse structural inequality with true inequality—in other words, if principals start to think they are more valuable or important than others in the school because of the unique role they hold—they will lose the respect of their staff and almost always fail as leaders. (Knight, 2011, p. 50)

Considering the core ideas that Knight (2011) puts forth in *Unmistakable Impact*, I’ve come to realize even if we’ve moved away from the professional learning and targets that we originally established when I first arrived at Broadmoor, the principles of partnership can really be applied to any initiative that we attempt to navigate together. So it is with *Be a Leader!* I think it wise to revisit my original research questions:



1. What is the potential of models like Impact Schools for school improvement in my school as outlined by Knight (2011)? What are the barriers that inhibit implementation?
2. What is the difference between partnership (Knight, 2011) as described in the literature and my lived experience as a practicing building principal?
3. Where does trust exist as a key component to the larger social endeavor of school improvement and culture building in my school?

### **The Vote**

*Jim Knight (2011) advocates principals lead teachers through what he calls “agreement and commitment” meetings (p. 15) after having determined the identified targets for professional learning. In his mind, agreement and commitment are two very different things. Agreement with the proposed initiative is different than committing to what it requires of you as a professional.*

*I have asked Jennifer to serve as the data collector for the meeting. She is standing off to the side with her Post-it© notes, marker, and easel. I’m at the front with my Be a Leader! book in hand.*

*“Ok, gang. Let’s get started.” I wait for a minute as the table noise falls off. When I think I have everyone’s attention, I say, “Here’s where we are: The summer book study was a success. Good for you. I believe, Erin, correct me...we had at least 20 of you participating?”*

*“Yep!” Erin says, proudly.*

*“That’s awesome. I’m excited you’re excited. Several of you weren’t here, but a few years ago, we found ourselves in a similar circumstance. As my meeting agenda says, I’d like to invite everyone to participate in what Jim Knight calls an agreement and commitment meeting.*

*Jennifer has agreed to take the votes and record any feedback. I'm going to step out and let you figure this out without me."*

*The staff sort of look around at each other. Step out?*

*I smile. "Yep. I'm not going to even be in the room. If you guys are this excited about Be a Leader!, well, then I'm happy for you and for us. But I want to be sure. I'd like to excuse myself from the library and leave you to the decision together. I don't want my presence to influence decisions or inhibit meaningful dialogue. You'll first take a vote about whether you agree Be a Leader! should be something to which we invest our time, resources, and energy. The second vote, done separately, will be a commitment vote. These are different, you guys. The commitment vote says, I'm in for whatever this new program asks of me. I realize that's a big ask for some of you, because you didn't participate in the book study—which was voluntary—so, you may be feeling a bit uncertain. Hopefully, you have trust in the testimony of your peers, however. Having said that, should the vote come back that we're not yet ready to agree or commit to anything, I'm fine with that too. It's entirely up to you. Entirely. All I ask is that you please be courteous, sincere, and engaged. This is a big deal, or at least it should be. Do you have any questions of me?"*

*Dan raises his hand, "Just to clarify, we are taking two votes. The first is whether we think Be a Leader! is a good fit for Broadmoor. The second, is a vote about whether we're committed to doing the work, even though we're not quite sure what all may be asked of us?"*

*There's a hint of skepticism and cynicism in his question. "I don't want to speak for anyone else, but I wasn't able to do the book study because I had other summer commitments. I don't think I should be penalized for that."*

*“Great question, Dan. Gang, we’re here because you guys expressed to the BLT that you wanted to move forward, well, that most of you wanted to move forward. I want this to be a fully involved process. I don’t want anyone feeling excluded, or punished, for goodness sake, or feeling like they didn’t have a chance to express what they’re thinking. This decision is a shared one. So, instead of allowing the book study folks to drive this, despite that being the majority of you, I first proposed that we have a meeting. If there are people who say they’re not ready, I hope they’ll feel like this is a way for them to safely say so.”*

*Dan, perhaps capturing the sentiment of a handful, sighs a bit and shrugs in submission.*

*I walk over to Jennifer. “What do you think? You ready?”*

*“I think so,” she says.*

*“You’ll be great. If there’s an issue, remember that it’s not directed at you. You’re just the recorder. And thanks, by the way, for agreeing to do this for me.”*

*“Ok, folks. I’m out. Do some great work and collaborating, guys. I know you can.” I give Jennifer a little wink and smile of encouragement and turn and exit the library, letting the two large doors latch behind me.*

*I walk down the hall and into the office. The Broadmoor secretary is there, looks up, and says, “You’re already done with the meeting?”*

*“Nope. Far from it,” I reply. “They’ve got some work to do and some things to decide, but I’m going to ask they do it without me down there.”*

*“Really?” she says, with a combination of incredulity and esteem. “And you don’t worry they’re going to kill each other?”*

“Oh, absolutely!” I laugh. “I’m totally worried! But I’m hoping that they’ll work through anything bumpy. They’re adults. They’re professionals. I sort of want to see what happens.”

“Well, good for you,” she says.

We shall see, I say to myself. We shall see.

...

A worry of mine about the vote and the agreement and commitment meeting is the possibility that a small number of Broadmoor staff could take down and stifle what is otherwise a really high-energy start to something. The book study was voluntary, but the people who didn’t participate are prone to not participate in much of anything. They had the same invite as everyone and, I understand, were even encouraged by a few who had personal connections with them. I suppose it’s possible they were, in fact, too busy to commit to any summer work, but I really don’t think it was that much to commit to. I think there were maybe six meetings total, a couple hours each. And you weren’t even asked to attend all of them, just the ones that worked with your summer schedule.

I guess I might accept it if any staff saying no to Be a Leader! came to me and said, “Steve, I didn’t vote for Be a Leader! because I was really hoping to start blank, or because I wanted to continue to develop and hone my skills with blank.” What I suspect, though, and I know this sounds cynical on my part, is that they’d just as soon opt to do nothing. These individuals are always operating from the *just leave me alone and let me teach* posture.

It’s interesting, because what I hoped to accomplish with the agreement and commitment meeting was an opportunity for the staff to see my choice to remove myself from the meeting as a gesture of trust. However, if there is discontent expressed by some—and it is often the case

that those with the strongest opinions also have the loudest voices—my absence may permit something I have not intended. I have learned that staff often look to the building principal to take on the tough conversation and the perceived bullies, the divergent minority. Not to say that we have those at Broadmoor, but we do have folks who aren't shy about speaking their minds, even disrespectfully, at times. In other words, did my move help to earn trust or diminish it?

...

*B.C. was with me, as it turns out, in a previous school district, and was responsible for initially bringing the Impact Schools model to that district, so spending time with him provided some valuable insight. As a former colleague, and one of my direct supervisors both in our former district and now again in my new home, he was excited about my hire at Broadmoor and was not surprised I was working to bring Impact Schools with me. The intent of our time together was to dig into the history behind the initial implementation of the process (the support provided, the intentions expressed) in our former district and gauge some general feelings about how much the process had accomplished what it set out to, also considering issues related to implementation at Broadmoor.*

*I am sitting in B.C.'s office. It's spacious. He has a large desk, books in stacks, diplomas on the wall. Some KU basketball framed artwork adorns his walls. I'm sitting in one of the chairs at a nearby table. B.C. at his desk. I rarely see him in a tie, but he must have had an important meeting because he is wearing one today.*

*"So, you know we are working on implementing Be a Leader! at Broadmoor. I'm pretty encouraged, frankly, by the staff response."*

*"That's good. Good for you guys. I've heard great things about the potential that program brings to schools."*

*“We tried the Impact Schools approach when I first got to Broadmoor, but it didn’t take. I think I own some of that, but I wanted to pick your brain a bit about it.”*

*“Sure.”*

*“When we were back in our former district, Impact Schools was a primary focus and seemed to offer so much potential. Do you think it made any impact? If so, why? If not, what, in your opinion got in the way?”*

*B.C. leans back in his high-backed leather chair. “A lot of the conversations that we had in our former home, I recall, were around different groups—board of education, superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals—all with their own idea of when things should really change. Honestly, Steve, the same is true here. It’s surely true everywhere. Probably true at the building-level, actually.”*

*“Right.”*

*“One of my highest priorities is always teacher retention. Creating an environment that people want to work in is paramount. My perspective, however, doesn’t always align with the priorities of the Board of Education, the other district-level administrators. I’m in the minority. The real measure of our success is our test scores. It’s that simple.”*

*“Yuck. That just doesn’t seem very enlightened. Very progressive,” I say.*

*“To the test score thing, models like Impact Schools, that seek to build relationships with the teachers, creates a sense of urgency, even impatience. Those just take time.*

*Sometimes people don’t believe we have that time.”*

*“But it’s so necessary!” I say. “We’re talking long-term wins, not short-term success, right?”*

*B.C. takes a minute before continuing, “Here’s what I think. The reason is because the cultural approach to education and the cultural approach to how we treat people with regards to our schools whether that’s parents, the board, or kids, or teachers, is far more an issue than is the instruction in the classroom. Now, the instruction in the classroom is the most important thing, but the barrier to improving instruction in the classroom is a more cultural issue...”*

*It was interesting to witness someone in such an influential position admit to the pressure that can be placed on a district in the interest of test scores. He seems to knowingly be talking out of both sides of his mouth.*

*B.C. goes on. “I recall a conversation this summer about upcoming professional development days. What ensued was a fairly negative conversation about the capacity of the teachers in our district. A comment was made that many people try to say they’re doing certain things in their classrooms, but the evidence in some building’s student test scores would suggest otherwise. There was a great deal of agreement at the table that the general instructional capacity of teachers in our district was pretty low-level at best.”*

*I sit here thinking, how does any of this line of talk about teachers allow for partnership?*

*“I’m fascinated, B.C., about this idea of competing perspectives in schools. I often say it’s really noisy out there. Lots of folks have agendas, and those agendas aren’t always aligned. This can’t help but ultimately influence the work of teachers. It’s no wonder you might see discontent or people identify with the initiative fatigue idea. What do you think about that?”*

*“Steve, I think it’s about accountability. At the end of the day, that’s what it’s about. We’re all accountable to one another, but we lose sight of that. For protection, maybe? I’m not sure. There’s a book that we read in our former district by Muhammad, do you remember it?”*

*“Of course. Actually, I’ve referenced that book a few times in my research.”*

*“I think he has a point,” says, B.C. “There is such a thing as a quadrant system of teachers. But I don’t think I agree with his categories. I believe that the quadrants are a combination of perception of themselves, and results of their students. So, you have teachers who have a high self-efficacy, they know they’re good and the results say they’re good. Those are teachers you have to leverage every way you can, presenting at PD, working with teachers, and doing those things. Then there are teachers who think they’re great, have a high opinion of themselves and their student results are terrible. Those are the teachers who are the hardest to deal with because they don’t see they need to make any change. They are the ones you have to have the most honest conversation with because you have to say, hey, I know you think this is working here, but it’s not.”*

*I interrupt. “Yeah, that reminds me of a story Jim Knight tells in his training. He makes the assertion that there are simply people who don’t know they need to change. I think he calls it precontemplation, or something. He gives this example of a group of teachers assembled to get some professional learning on classroom management. He says that it’s likely most are sitting there thinking, ‘Well, I know why you’re here, but I don’t know why I’m here.’”*

*B.C. chuckles at that. “Yeah, that’s true! Then you have teachers who have a low perception of themselves, they don’t think they’re doing very well, but their kids’ performance tells a different story. These are folks you just have to rain encouragement on. You tell them you may not think you’re doing well, but look how well you’re doing! To get them to just continue to develop belief in themselves. That’s more of a cheerleader approach to those people.”*

*I’m jotting notes. This is fascinating. Do I agree with what he’s saying?*



*“And then you have the folks who know they’re not doing well and the results say they’re not doing well, and those are the folks you have to coach the daylights out of to help them get better or you get to a point where you realize they’re just not going to get better...But the approach you take to each of those quadrants is completely different. And ultimately you have to ask yourself where am I at with teachers in each of these quadrants, because just as you have to ask yourself with Impact Schools, needing to recognize the contextual difference in schools, there is also a difference with each teacher.”*

*I say nothing, but I’m struck by this notion that before entering into a partnership with teachers, they are often placed in quadrants, ranked, defined, categorized. Does this do as much to shape my behavior as it does theirs?*

*I sit for a minute, considering, before I sort of reframe everything. “So, I wanted to come in and get your perspective. We started Impact Schools back when I first arrived at Broadmoor. I went through all of the same steps, addressed why I had found success with it previously, etc., etc. The reception appeared great, but it just didn’t stick. Now, here we are with Be a Leader! Again, staff are pumped. Probably more so than with Impact Schools. I can probably own a lot of why Impact Schools, at least in its first iteration, didn’t last. I just don’t want to make the same mistakes with Be a Leader! What are your thoughts?”*

*I see B.C. take a quick peek at his computer screen, maybe checking his inbox, before resuming our conversation.*

*“I think it’s great you’re being so thoughtful, Steve. Truly, most principals wouldn’t be so reflective. If something doesn’t work, they usually blame the teachers, or something they claim is outside of their control. To Impact Schools, first, if there is any tiny bit of challenge with the Jim Knight stuff it’s that there is an assumption of a certain level of performance that is*

*an undertone in his stuff. It's that teachers have the right answers and you have to empower them to share those and implement them. In some places though, the truth is, teachers don't have the right answers. In fact, they often have the wrong ones. Or, their answers are actually doing more damage. There seems to be an assumption with Impact Schools, and maybe with Be a Leader!, and something that you need to be mindful of, that you take a really professional staff and turn them into something amazing. But how does it work in a place where we don't have a highly skilled staff and you're trying to do the same thing? ... Not to say anything negative about Broadmoor. That's not what I mean. For me, the difference is in how you define partnership. Is the partnership about you and the teacher? Or is the partnership about you and the teacher in the interest of students? Partnership is being communicated about what is the way for us to get better for the kids, and the best way for us to do that is for us to be partners. Then all of the sudden partnership for me means having honest conversations. It doesn't mean I help you forever."*

*"Hmm. You're definitely right about the assumption piece. Both models really do assume teachers have the right answers and should just be put in positions to have greater influence. But I've definitely worked with some people, still do, who I would never want to lend the keys to the car."*

*B.C. laughs at this. "Exactly. So, it's partnership in moderation, I suppose. Partnership with a degree of caution. After all, partnership needs to be earned. Don't you think?"*

### **An Exciting Start**

We had an awesome day of professional learning today! The Be a Leader! presenter was pitch perfect, and the staff seemed genuinely engaged in the material. She had them laughing and crying. It was great to begin to see some of what we've discussed start to take shape a bit. I

could tell that even those who didn't participate in the summer book study connected with the material and with each other!

I elected to sit with the staff during the in-service today. I think sometimes administrators make the mistake opting to sit on the periphery of the learning that takes place, communicating that they are somehow exempt or above it. Fullan (2014) states that principals should be "lead learners" (p. 9). I wanted to keep that in mind as we embarked officially on our Be a Leader! journey.

One thing that was powerful about this morning was how vulnerable and personal the training asked participants to be. The Be a Leader! program messages that there isn't anything we ask of students that we don't first ask of the adults. I really like this aspect and felt like this required me to join staff in the learning and discussion this morning. We had to journal about our personal lives, identify goals (both personal and professional), speak to disappointments (both personal and professional), and address conflicts we know are getting in the way for us as a staff. What a great culture builder!

I could see that some, like me, were perhaps a bit reluctant to fully enter into learning that required this of us. Typically, the professional learning, even with good intentions, is one-sided, expert-led, with the participants just passively engaged. This instead was relevant, intimate, and individualized. Having a third-party, objective, trainer guiding us was exactly what we needed. I don't think the message would have been as well-received had it been me, for example, working through the same information, or someone from the district.

Jim Knight (2011) says, "When we take the humanity out of professional learning, we ignore the complexity of any helping relationship, and we make it almost impossible for learning to occur" (Kindle Edition, location 391). I believe that today's Be a Leader! training was rich in

humanity and that is why it connected so well with the staff. Nothing was taken for granted and the facilitator sought to meet us where we were. Knight (2011) reminds us our charge is, “to recognize the inherent value of others and to celebrate positive human values, such as empathy, support, love, trust, and respect” (Kindle Edition, location 393). It was evident in the response from the staff today they felt respected and supported. I’m excited for opportunities like this embedded in the Be a Leader! program that allow for partnership renewal. I hope I’m able to identify and seize these opportunities, as I’ve learned them to be rare.

...

One of my favorite references comes from an important book I always keep close, *Shaping School Cultures* (Deal & Peterson, 2009). In one particular section, the authors (Deal & Peterson, 2009) discuss the value in creating school mission statements. I’ve bookmarked a unique example that I find myself returning to from time to time—the mission statement of the “Ganado Primary School” (p. 22). This is how it reads:

*The Ganado Primary School’s mission is to provide opportunities for children to make sense of their world, to respect themselves and others, to respect their environment, and to appreciate and understand their cultural and linguistic heritage. Children, teachers, and administrators all bring varying points of view, resources, expectations of and assumptions about the world, and ways of dealing with their daily circumstances. Our mission is to help everyone negotiate their experiences with the content of the classroom, instructional style, and the social, emotional, physical, and professional interactions in school life. We believe that a relaxed atmosphere where surprise, challenge, hard work, celebration, humor, satisfaction, and collegiality is the natural order of the day for all care must be taken to insure that sound philosophical, developmental, and cultural*

*understanding of children are at the heart of decision making in the classroom and the school. (p. 22-23)*

Here's my favorite part:

*The question, 'What is it like to be a child?' underlies staff development, matters of curriculum, parent involvement, and instructional approaches. 'What is it like to be a teacher?' is an equally valid question. What is true about our mission to children is true for teachers and staff as well. (p. 23)*

Noble. Sincere. Humble. Virtuous. I am particularly struck by the language that the school's mission statement speaks directly to the work of and care for teachers.

In my research, I came across this potent article on teacher collaboration. I found it to be extremely timely, as it brought to light some things I knew to be true, but also aspects of the lives of teachers that I think I sometimes take for granted, have forgotten to tend to, or never fully understood.

Little (1990) seeks to answer questions about the role of collaboration and teacher relations to the satisfaction of teachers and their engagement in the process of school improvement. Does the promotion and creation of additional opportunities for staff collaboration have a correlation with teachers' connectedness to school and their general professional self-efficacy? Little (1990) states a "harder look is in order" (p. 510):

Teachers' collaborations sometimes serve the purposes of well-conceived change, but the assumed link between the increased collegial contact and improvement-oriented change does not seem to be warranted: Closely bound groups are instruments both for promoting change and for conserving the present...Collaborations may arise naturally out of the problems and circumstances that teachers experience in common, but often they appear

contrived, inauthentic, grafted on, perched precariously (and often temporarily) on the margins of real work. (pp. 509-510)

Little's (1990) point is that we need to understand that strong and weak ties are inherent within the working world of teachers. Sometimes the weak ties are apparent, voiced or observed. Other times they are silent, rarely, if ever, publicly detected, but nonetheless professionally obstructing. What's more, in the spirit of working to create a higher level of interdependence within a larger professional learning community, administrators may inadvertently place teachers in positions that do more harm than good. Similarly, administrators, and other school officials, may not altogether appreciate that not only do some teachers find structured collaboration contrived and of little use, they may actually see it as detrimental to their professional practice; seeing instead greater value in the more natural, day-to-day anecdotal sharing that takes place in the halls, at recess, in the lounge and before and after school.

We encounter references to story-swapping, sharing, helping, teaming, and the like. Such terms, I propose, constitute more than a simple inventory of activities. They are phenomenologically discrete forms that vary from one another in the degree to which they induce mutual obligation, expose the work of each person to the scrutiny of others, and call for, tolerate, or reward initiative in matters of curriculum and instruction. (Little, 1990, p. 512)

I think about my efforts to create a master schedule that provides dedicated collaboration time—we call it “right work” time—for the staff at Broadmoor. Of course, the idea is that there is simply some work in our profession that is best done together. However, Little (1990) gives me pause and makes me wonder to what extent do I recognize the burden this places on staff to open themselves up, be vulnerable with people they may work alongside but don't necessarily

trust, and expose their professional practice (celebrations and shortcomings) to the probing of their teammates.

Little (1990) reminds the reader that this idea of transparency and open-door-ness is a relatively new phenomenon, however well-intentioned, to the teaching profession. In fact, many veteran teachers see this practice as an affront to what they've always understood—if my work is not scrutinized, it must mean I'm doing a good job. Likewise, I, surely like many administrators, take for granted that teammates have the necessary relationship required to open themselves and their work in this manner. “Friendships may in fact suffer considerable strain,” says Little (1990), “when teachers attempt to carry fundamental social relations into the classroom, the heart of the professional enterprise” (p. 513). In other words, relationships at school may be congenial, but not collegial (Barth, 2006). *I can be friends with you, maybe even good enough to spend time together outside of work, but laying bare my professional self, well that's another matter entirely.*

Little (1990) asserts that we as administrators, and the schooling enterprise, in general, pay little respect to what Barth (2006) refers to as “craft knowledge” (p. 9). “Where the organization of space, time, and task seriously constrain interactions, colleagues learn indirectly and informally about their own and others' practice through moment-by-moment exchange” (Little, 1990, p. 514). I know my hope and aim with dedicated “right work” time was to in fact give teachers time to share craft knowledge toward the betterment of the group. But how do staff at Broadmoor truly perceive and receive this gesture? Are our conversations authentic, or is the whole thing a compliance exercise, seen as something obligatory and of little practical value to their daily work?

The primacy that we as researchers place on rational discourse may have led us to underestimate the cumulative and potentially rich effect of staff-room stories on teachers' conception of their work. Despite paeans to teachers' 'practical knowledge,' organizers of structured collaborations typically work to supplant teachers' own talk with a 'shared technical language' derived from classroom research, learning theory, or other sources external to teachers' immediate experience. (Little, 1990, p. 514)

As I strive to establish partnership, not just between myself and staff, but also within Broadmoor staff relations, I wonder about the impact of "right work" time. Perhaps there's room to share the main points of Little's (1990) article and juxtapose it alongside some open dialogue about my intent of this collaboration time. Perhaps I need to present my perspective, discuss more specifically my aim of the time, but also provide staff an opportunity to share to what extent they are ready for such a professional push. Again, this is an instance where intentions are well-meaning, but may fail to fully work in concert with the larger context.

As always, more food for thought.

I'll quickly add that a challenge to this research is that I'm discovering there are aspects of my work as principal that I've otherwise just navigated through blindly, never really pausing long enough to consider implications. Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) refer to this as "solutionitis, the propensity to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved" (p. 24). We definitely suffer from solutionitis in schools, and I'm as guilty as anyone. My research has prompted me to scrutinize every decision I've made and continue to make to the extent I'm nearly frozen to attempt much. Ignorance is bliss, or something like that. I suspect though, ultimately, it'll all be for the better.



## **Warranted Work**

Something powerful that Be a Leader! asks of participating schools is a survey taken by all stakeholders—staff, parents, and students. The questions center around leadership, but also address engagement, academics, feelings of connectedness to school, and relationships. Broadmoor stakeholders took this survey, and the results were enlightening.

Revealed in the survey results were data that essentially said Broadmoor is a great place to work, serve, and go to school. Parents overwhelmingly expressed a positive impression of our school. They acknowledged confidence in the administration and teachers, and said they absolutely feel a strong connection to their school. Similarly, students stated they really enjoyed school, liked their teachers, and feel Broadmoor is a safe, inclusive environment. Staff shared that they really enjoy teaching at Broadmoor, value parent partners, and believe the school to be a positive place to work. Obviously, this was very validating for us as a school community and gave us much to celebrate.

The survey also revealed, unsurprisingly, a few areas of growth. The first was in the students' level of engagement and their views on student leadership opportunities. The data strongly suggested that while our students like going to school at Broadmoor, work remains to include them in leadership and school decision-making.

Just as important was the data about staff perception of the same thing. Staff made known that while they love working at Broadmoor, they don't often feel their voices are heard, that their decisions carry equal weight, and that work could be done to facilitate more occasions for them to be intentionally involved in decisions related to school improvement and planning. Certainly, what was so compelling about this data was that the survey was taken anonymously,

had 100% staff response, and was objective, with the third-party having no influence on how the results shook out.

I think what was particularly eye-opening for me as a principal was that staff felt as they do about shared leadership at Broadmoor, or lack thereof. I've done a great deal to involve teacher voice in our decision-making, whether that be specifically through Impact School (Knight, 2011) work, or the way we've formed the BLT, or input on how we should structure our "right work" time. Despite what I believe to be overt gestures to indicate my desire to include teacher voice, there are clearly those who still feel a disconnect.

Knight (2011) talks about this idea that people are not motivated by other people's goals. It's an obvious statement, but one that is rarely heeded, or applied when accomplishing the important work of school improvement. Take, for example, the difference between how Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) and Be a Leader! were received. Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) was presented as a method of school improvement to the Broadmoor staff, but it was still my idea (a Steve-thing, if you will). Conversely, the Be a Leader! program, which seeks to accomplish the same ends, even if it was originally something that had my fingerprints, was mostly grass-roots in nature and driven by the teaching staff. It's very interesting then how Knight's (2011) ideas about partnership have come to fruition with this new endeavor.

The survey will be administered again next spring with the goal of moving the dial on some of the areas of growth that were identified. It will be interesting and incredibly valuable to my leadership aims to see if decisions I have made in light of the survey, in light of my research, have the impact I hope for.

...

*"Well, this was a nice surprise," I say, to Amy as I pull out the seat at our table.*

*Amy said she arrived about twenty minutes earlier, as indicated by the half-empty pint of beer sitting in front of her. The bar we are at is full, with a Friday crowd who all seem to have had the same idea as we did. It's noisy, some alternative music providing backdrop. We are at a small four-seater table near the bar.*

*"I'm glad you said yes," Amy replies with a smile. "I just thought it was important we get to know each other on a personal level. I have no agenda. I'm good peeps. I promise!"*

*"Ha. I know. And I really appreciate the invite. I don't probably do stuff like this enough, so good for you wresting me out of the house."*

*The waitress drops by and I order a drink.*

*"So, what's up? How was your week?" I say.*

*"It was crazy, Steve. I just felt like I was running the whole week. I barely even saw you!" Amy says.*

*Amy serves as the new instructional coach at Broadmoor. Hers is an important and unique position. She is not a classroom teacher, but she is not an administrator either. This intentionally nebulous role causes her to live in a professional no-man's-land from time to time. She's high energy, intelligent, organized, and positive. I suspect she'll be great for the culture at Broadmoor, having made a fantastic impression on me and with the staff.*

*"Tell me about it," I respond. "I felt like I was constantly chasing my tail. Glad it's the weekend, that is for sure." My beer has arrived and I'm thirsty.*

*"How do you feel like things are going?" Amy prompts. "I mean, you know, with Be a Leader!, staff morale, that sort of thing."*

*"I think pretty well, actually. Don't you? I know you don't have anything to compare it to, but I've not seen this group so revved about anything in a long time. I'm excited for them.*

*Excited to be a part of it. I have told them that it's like a Haley's comet and something that just doesn't come around that often in schools. Going to ride the wave as long as I can."*

*"I think it's great. You're right, I don't know what life at Broadmoor was like before, but I've worked in a handful of schools and can tell everyone there seems to be on the same page. Well, almost everyone."*

*"Almost everyone?" I ask.*

*"I don't know. Maybe I'm making this about me, but I'm still having trouble making inroads with some of the teachers. That's probably just from being new," says Amy as she takes a drink, shrugging. "I know I'm a lot to take!"*

*"Yeah, I'm sure that's part of it. The new thing. I can speak to that from firsthand experience. Honestly, there are times I still feel new. This is a tough group though, Amy. That's just a fact. I think one of the reasons Be a Leader! is so exciting for me is that I've not been able to get everyone on the same page since I started at Broadmoor. Six years is a long time. You'd think by now I'd have figured that place out," I joke.*

*"Why do you think some are so hard to reach?" she asks.*

*"Honestly? Trust. That's the deal. I really think there's an issue of trust at Broadmoor. I don't really know from where it comes, but I really think it's absence is the reason we've had so much trouble finding our way."*

*"Broadmoor isn't the first school to have trust issues, Steve. You act like it's your fault, or something."*

*I nod, not saying anything for a second.*

*I sort of shrug and say, "Well, maybe it is. Heck, I don't know. I've always thought that part of it was just a culture I inherited when I got there. But it's been six years, Amy. Surely, whatever Broadmoor was about before, now has my fingerprints. It's mine to own."*

*Amy sits there for a minute, sips her beer, then says, "Are you aware that there is a Steve-camp and an anti-Steve-camp?" I can tell she wants to reel it back in as soon as she says it.*

*"Really? Are you serious?" I say with indignation.*

*"I don't know how big of a deal it actually is, but that's what someone was just talking to me about the other day."*

*"Geez. That sucks. Why would someone be in an anti-Steve-camp? I mean, even if they were, why would they be so brazen to say it!" Shaking my head, I put my beer down and exhale.*

*"That's bullshit," I mutter.*

*"Steve. First, you're the boss. It comes with the territory. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, if I did. I guess I just assumed you've been doing this long enough you'd expect some of that. Again, sorry." She holds up her hands in appeal. After a minute, she continues, "The other thing that I think is a factor is the difference between the new staff at Broadmoor and the ones who were there before you arrived. The people you've hired. They're just different. Everyone sees it."*

*The waitress comes by and we order another round. I'm wondering how forthcoming and honest I can be with Amy. I'm assuming she's in my corner, but I really don't know her all that well.*

*"I'm writing my dissertation on all of this. Did I tell you that?" I start.*

*"I didn't know that," Amy says with a smile. "That's impressive. Good for you."*

*“Yeah, it’ll be good to finish. One of the things I’m writing about is trust. Inspired, actually, by my efforts as a principal at Broadmoor. What’s funny...ironic...in what you’re saying about this anti-Steve sentiment is that I actually have tried to learn more about myself in the interest of reaching those staff members who were here at Broadmoor before me. You’re right. They’re different. But I wonder more about me. Am I different toward them? It’s a chicken-egg thing, probably. It’s just something that I know really gets in our way, and I desperately want to figure it out.”*

*“I’m sure it’s frustrating. But, again, do you really think it’s you? Or is that just how they are? I’ve worked in buildings with people like that. Frankly, they’re just not very nice, Steve. That’s not on you, nor does it reflect on your leadership,” Amy offers in an attempt at reassurance.*

*“I think it does, though. That’s my point. I don’t think it’s enough for me to just chalk it up to ‘that’s how some people just are’. They work there, too. It’s important, and in everyone’s interest, for me to continue to find ways to connect. Regardless of how they treat me, I take the high road. Always. That’s the ask, right? I model the sort of relationship I want to have.”*

*Dubiously, Amy says, “That’s nice of you, Steve. But do they honestly deserve it? I mean, you’ve tried your approach, and what has it gotten you? What would happen, you think, if you just had a ‘come to Jesus’ with them and called them on their bullshit?”*

*“Are you implying I’m being taken advantage of?”*

*I can tell I’m getting defensive. It’s clear Amy only wants to help and may be speaking as much to her own challenges with building relationships.*

*“No. Stop. I’m not trying to insult you. Honest. Remember, I’m on your team. I’m in the Steve-camp!” she says this as she nudges me with her shoulder. “I just think some of those*

*staff members don't know how good they have it, is all. You give them a lot of grace, and I just don't know that they deserve it."*

*"Sure, they do. We all deserve some grace."*

*"Yes, but at what expense?"*

*"Well, my approach has led us to Be a Leader!, right? That's a really great school initiative that has everyone rallied. It was my idea. I planted the seed. I'm not taking any credit for it, of course, because that's not the point. I know these guys. I'm learning what makes them tick. Those staff members you think are so tough are really good people, if you get to know them. I think they've been yanked around enough for so many years, they're just cynical. Some of it has been my doing. They have reason to behave that way, is my point. I'm going to choose to fight the good fight. Lose some battles but win the war. All of those sort of platitudes."*

*"Ok, you're the boss, and you clearly know what you're doing. I just want you to know I'm on your team and will help in any way I can."*

*"Thank you. It's not always easy, this work we do. But there's so much potential to be great at Broadmoor. I'm just going to weather some of this stuff and remember the big picture."*

*"Good plan. They're lucky to have you."*

*"Oh, save it. Brown-noser."*

*Amy responds with a wry smile, "Who me? Nah!"*

## **Mid-year Progress Check**

Part of the Be a Leader! program includes two annual on-site coaching visits. We had our second one today. We have since converted our former building leadership team, per the approval of the staff, to a teacher-representative leadership team fully driven by action planning

related to Be a Leader! The coach elected to have a full day of planning with this newly formed teacher leader team.

Be a Leader! really strives to empower the staff to take stock of school improvement components, find what's working and for whom, and also identify areas where we need revision to our practice, or some fresh eyes. My role as principal is primarily that of barrier remover. While I'm certainly still involved in the oversight of the team meetings, I participate as a true equal in the process. As ideas and discussions float to the surface, it is my job to point out potential pitfalls and provide broader context. With this in mind, today's meeting was particularly interesting.

The team, I'll call them the "BL" team, met with our coach in a classroom we typically have reserved for STEM exploration. There are twelve of them total, with all grade levels represented, except for one (as the positions were 100% voluntary, this was just coincidental). Knowing finding substitute teachers for all twelve would be taxing on the budget and the flow of the day, we elected to do six with the coach in the morning, and the other six in the afternoon, post-lunch. I elected to come in and out of the day's meeting as my schedule permitted.

What was intriguing for me to observe was how the BL team communicated with our coach the challenges they were experiencing with staff engagement and teacher buy-in. There was a palpable level of frustration felt among the team, requiring the coach to help keep the conversation positive and forward-thinking.

*"They've had plenty of time to be ready!"*

*"We voted on this. If you need support, that's one thing, but you don't get to say no thank you now! We're past that."*



*“I just can’t believe how rude people are. They’re just blatantly ignoring what we’re asking of them. And it’s not like we’re asking that much!”*

I found this type of teacher talk really interesting. Some of these individuals on BL I’ve found, ironically, to behave in the very manner they’re now denouncing. I think then about the importance of perspective. I don’t have theirs and they don’t have mine. This cognitive dissonance between people working in a place, all seemingly toward the same end, really can have an impact on progress, culture, and change.

So how did I handle this? While I let the coach handle the lion’s share of the discussion that day, the times I weighed in I really spoke to the BL group about pausing, really taking into account what has been said, listening with the intent of understanding, and then working to better gauge the motivation of the behavior. Instead of just categorizing it as resistance, we need to get at the heart of what people are struggling with.

I also referred members of the BL to an article I recently read called, “Riding the Implementation Curve” (Lee & Min, 2017). The authors explore issues related to teacher buy-in and implementation of comprehensive school reform efforts. I directed team members to two important points from the author. The first is that buy-in is important, particularly as it relates to perception of the new initiative or program (Lee & Min, 2017). How then can we better understand what the true perception of Be a Leader! is among staff? “When teachers do not see the value in the policy or do not believe in the effect of recommended changes, they are less likely to make the suggested changes in instruction” (Lee & Min, 2017, p. 376). This article also discusses the importance of ownership in the change (Lee & Min, 2017). So, I also challenged the group to not only consider perception, but also to strive to know better the degree of ownership people are feeling about Be a Leader! For one, not all were involved in the original

book study. That's important. For another, while the BL team is representative, voluntary, it still doesn't represent the staff as a whole. Are the ones expressing skepticism or who are challenging what is being asked of them feeling any ownership in the implementation of Be a Leader!?

Lee and Min (2017) also remind us, as I reminded the BL, that reform, particularly of the scope of Be a Leader! simply takes time. Time, support, and persistence.

In order to guarantee the success of reform programs, educational leaders need to be patient and, more importantly, provide more effective training and better-quality support for their teachers, especially if they are to fully understand the process and buy-in with the program. (Lee & Min, 2017, p. 388)

This was something I really emphasized with our BL team. This all just takes time. We rarely see much in education to fruition. We rarely sustain reform or school improvement efforts. It's no wonder then that some on our staff are dubious. Of course, they are. If Be a Leader! is going to prove to be any different, we're going to definitely need to learn from past mistakes.

Tshannen-Moran (2014) reminds readers, "Enhancing the overall quality of trust in a school is best achieved by taking a strengths-based approach, such as appreciative inquiry, rather than by airing grievances publicly in a way that leads to finger-pointing and blame" (p. 248). I think about this as I assess the levels of trust at Broadmoor and the behavior today of members of our BL team. I'm admittedly guilty of the highly unproductive leadership behavior to blame certain individuals on what ails our culture. While I never do that publicly, seeing members of our leadership team do this prompts me to reflect on what I model publicly.

...

*“Good morning. How’d the Be a Leader! meeting go?” This I ask of Michelle when she peeks her head in to my office.*

*“Yeah. That’s what I’m here to talk about. Have a minute?”*

*Michelle is a promising young teacher. She’s affable, professional, always goes out of her way to pitch in, and is unquestionably one of the Broadmoor students’ favorite teachers. She’s also one of the coordinators for Be a Leader! As such, she and I often touch base about implementation, the challenges she’s experiencing, the progress we’re making.*

*She steps in and finds a seat in one of the two chairs that sit opposite mine.*

*“Everything go ok?” I ask.*

*“Yep. Actually, it was a pretty positive meeting, given how we left off last time. The one group that was having so much trouble, seemed way more engaged this time. I mean, either they were more engaged, or they did a great job acting,” she offers, chuckling a bit. “I think that we’ve made quite a bit of progress in these past few weeks. Making our staff meetings now just about Be a Leader! was a great move. It just alleviates the pressure of trying to find time elsewhere to answer everyone’s questions. So thanks for allowing us to do that.”*

*I nod. “Sure. Well, that was the recommendation anyway. And the staff all agreed that’s what they wanted to do, so it made sense. Well, sounds like you guys are moving ahead. Great. What’s next then? Are the teams going to bring me proposals to have me look them over? Will there be time for collaboration and some input from me? I ask because while I definitely want the teams to know they have the power, and responsibility, to make some decisions, I want them to know the landscape and the big picture. It’s important they feel empowered, but their decisions aren’t made in a vacuum, right?”*

*“Yes, sure,” says Michelle. “I really only think three of the five teams will be ready to bring something to you soon. The other two teams are struggling a bit getting everyone on the same page.”*

*The Be a Leader! program, which Broadmoor has purchased for the year, asks that staff form sub-committees, of their own choosing, that operate under broader school improvement headings. Michelle and another coordinator are in charge of getting the teams organized and tasking them with recommending changes underneath the heading to which they are assigned. Be a Leader! comes with rubrics and guides for school implementation. It’s all spelled out, with plenty of online resources to help teams work toward plans that are reasonable and in keeping with other continuing school goals.*

*She pauses, “The reason I wanted to talk with you is there is one team that seems definitely not on the same page as everyone else. 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I mean, their body language screams that they just really aren’t buying in and do not see value in the program. I guess I want to know what you recommend.”*

*“Oh, really?” I say, not having observed this myself. “Well, that can be expected. I think experience has taught me that getting everyone moving fully in the same direction is a tall order at best. What do you think is the motivator there? Have you directly asked a member of that team the why behind their behavior?”*

*“No. I was sort of hoping you might.” Michelle says this with a pleading look.*

*I smirk. “Ha. Well, sorry, dear. I think, honestly, that’s the role of the coordinator. It’s not me passing the buck. Honest. But Be a Leader! insists that the role of the principal is to remove barriers and not be directly responsible for implementation. I could help you find the time to sit down with them, provide their classrooms with coverage, or reserve some after school*

*time. I could even help you come up with some questions that would help create dialogue opportunities and not seem accusatory. That would be really important if in fact they are feeling some level of discontent.”*

*“Ok,” she says, “I think that’s a good compromise. And you’re probably right. If we want this to remain a teacher-driven and not a Steve-thing, then that’s probably the better approach.”*

*“There we go again with the Steve-thing. You know, that almost sounds like Steve-things are bad things. I hope everyone realizes that I would never make a decision that wasn’t in the interest of students and staff. It’s almost like a Steve-thing is some sort of professional learning Scarlet Letter.”*

*“I know. I’m sorry. You know what I meant. I wasn’t trying to insult you, or anything.”*

*I can tell she thinks mentioning that may have rubbed me the wrong way, though that’s not the first time I’ve said as much, even having used the Scarlett Letter joke. But our relationship is strong enough that we can have candid conversations like these and know that it’s safe.*

*“I didn’t think you’d insult me, Michelle. Don’t be ridiculous. Just thinking out loud again, is all. So, what? Are you going to email the first grade team?”*

*“Yep, as soon as I leave here.”*

*“Good for you. You really may be surprised at the answer they give. But even if it’s hard to hear, it’s better you’re extending the invite for input. They’ll appreciate that, and the relationship will be better for it. Trust me.”*

*She nods and stands. “Got it. Sorry, and thanks for listening. I guess I’m still finding my way with the teacher-leader role. I’m not used to it.”*

*“Don’t kid yourself, Michelle. You’re doing great. You’ve really earned the respect of your peers. And this is a tough group to impress, let me tell ya! Go send your email and let me know what comes of it. Remember, be open to what they say, even if you find it frustrating, or difficult to understand. I read somewhere: the conversation IS the relationship. That’s good advice. I don’t follow it all of the time but doesn’t make it any less true. Good luck.”*

*Michelle thanks me again and exits. Again, I’m left feeling a little unsteady. I’m working to embrace the shared-decision making platform of Be a Leader!, but honestly, resent a bit this idea that a Steve-thing is somehow a bad thing.*

...

Why did Impact Schools come to an untimely demise? I think there were lots of factors. One, I was new to the building, and I perhaps rushed into it. I think principals who move from one building to another are much like teachers in the “this works for me” sense. We have found perceived success using a certain leadership style and believe that we can just step into a new situation and shape it to be like the one we just left. That’s simply not the case. Schools all have their own unique culture and personality. A principal, in my opinion, must take stock of the things they’re stepping into, the things they’ve inherited, pay respect to it, assess it, and then proceed with care and prudence.

I think we went through the process the right way, establishing school learning targets and engaging staff in the agreement and commitment of those targets. I think where I erred, perhaps, is by not working to keep the momentum going. Amid too many other district initiatives and school goings-on that as a new principal I didn’t yet fully appreciate and understand, it just withered on the vine.

In his book, *Focus*, Schmoker (2011) recommends establishing clarity and simplicity with respect to professional learning endeavors of any kind, knowing how difficult it is to sustain much in schools.

Organizations must carefully determine their highest priorities, their focus—even if it is only "one thing." Having done so, organizations should then expend enormous amounts of organizational energy clarifying and simplifying those priorities—and resist any pursuit that could detract from them. (Schmoker, 2011, p. 17)

Therein lies the misstep with my first crack at Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) at Broadmoor. There was not the sustained energy required to fend off the other diversions from our work. Broadmoor, like all schools and organizations, was a wheel in motion. I attempted to walk in and view the school as a blank canvas, when in fact the approach probably should have been to find a way to situate what Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) seeks to accomplish within what was already successful and in place.

Where I did get it right, I believe, is that I began to create a culture where they saw me as a building leader willing to invite them into the process. At no point did I dictate for them what I thought their targets should be. The building leadership team was chosen by the staff. My role was to stretch their thinking and work to hold them accountable to things they'd agreed to. I failed, in that respect. It wasn't for lack of effort. Like the teachers, surely, I just got caught in the quicksand of life in schools. Before we knew it, what once had energy and promise, suddenly wasn't getting any air time.

In hindsight, now having considered trust as an important ingredient in the establishment of a strong school culture, I wonder what my inability to sustain what I had started in earnest with Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) did to the ethos and spirit of the staff. Did I come in with

promise but then fall victim to what has taken down many a good administrator and school initiative, thus rendering me just like everyone else? If so, that would certainly influence future engagement from staff and belief in my credibility to see things through.

...

*My oldest daughter, Kennedy, and I are awaiting our Starbucks to be ready. It's early on a sleepy Saturday morning.*

*"Dad, do you like being a principal?" she asks.*

*"Yeah, sure. I mean, mostly," I say. "Why?"*

*"I think that's what I want to do. I think I'd really like being an elementary principal, like you."*

*Kennedy is a sophomore in high school. She's one of the more personable people I've ever met. Lights up a room. As her dad, of course, I think she can do anything she wants. I'm somewhat surprised she thinks she wants to do what I do.*

*"When did you decide this?" I ask.*

*"You know how the counselors at school give you those aptitude tests, or whatever they're called? They're supposed to help you determine where your strengths lie and then match you with possible careers that fit. All of mine came back saying that I need to work with people. And I think that's probably right. I seem to be really good at that. I also really like working with kids. Being a principal seems to check all of my boxes."*

*We have gotten our drinks and I'm pulling out and back onto the main road. I pat her knee, "Well, good for you. That's great that you have a goal. There's a lot of school, you know? I mean, I didn't just graduate college and immediately become a principal."*



*“You were a teacher, first. I know that. But you were also an assistant principal? I bet that helped.”*

*“It did. I found I didn’t do a lot the same way as the principal I was working with, but I could learn my own way of operating. It’s such a big job, it was nice to fall down and have someone else to lean on. But they don’t have assistant principal jobs at the elementary level. I was fortunate.”*

*“Yeah, it just seems like a really fun job. I can tell you something, though. I think I would really enjoy working with kids and being in charge, but I don’t know that I would want to work at a school like Broadmoor.”*

*That’s an interesting comment. “Why do you say that?” I ask.*

*“It just seems like you spend way too much time trying to make the adults happy at your school. I don’t want to be a principal unless I’m spending my time with kids,” she says.*

*“Hmm,” I think about this a second. “So, clearly the stories I share from school are giving you an impression.”*

*“Yeah, and every story you have seems to be about teachers. Who’s mad at you. Who’s made a parent upset. Who said or did something that you didn’t like. I remember when you were at that other school, you had all kinds of crazy kid stories. They were funny and made me think your job was really cool. You don’t seem to have many kid stories anymore. The teachers at your school just seem like a bunch of babies. That’s all. Yuck. No thanks. I don’t know that I could do all of that. And it sounds like the parents aren’t any easier than the teachers. That’s just not the type of school I want to work at.”*

*We’re nearing her friend’s house. This conversation with Kennedy has taken me a bit by surprise, but it has prompted me to reflect a little. Not only am I concerned about the way I’m*

*portraying my experience at Broadmoor, which is clearly not very positive, I'm also curious about the apparent proportion of time I spend talking about the adults in my professional world.*

*"I like my job, Kennedy," I say as we're pull into the driveway of her friend's house. "I really do. It's rewarding. The adults at Broadmoor are just like adults anywhere. They care and want to be heard. They just want to feel like they count, I think. It's part of a principal's job to be sure I'm listening. For a principal, the adult world is equally important to the kid world. One doesn't work well without the other working well."*

*"If you say so. I still think they sound like a bunch of babies. And I don't like it when they're not nice to you." She says this before leaning in for a quick hug, then stepping out of the car. "Bye, dad. Love you."*

*"Love you, too, kid."*

*When an interruption occurs . . . perhaps it is time to remember the calling of the ethnographer—to look deeply, to search for pattern and meaning and significance and story . . . to find a way into and through the interruption, and thus into a living story that truly opens the way to transcendence. (Poulous, 2012, p. 331)*

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

“No star is ever lost we once have seen. We may always be what we might have been.”

—quote attributed to Adelaide A. Procter

*I see it's 7:45 and realize I'm going to be late for our meeting, if I don't hustle. I gather my computer and hardcopy of the survey results and head down the hall toward Michelle's room. I'm meeting with her and Amy to discuss the results of a recent Broadmoor PTA survey aimed at determining how they can financially best support our school. The survey was administered to our parent community and to the staff at Broadmoor. The respondents are anonymous but are provided opportunity to also share comments along with their responses. One survey item directly addressed the possibility that the PTA would help financially support the Be a Leader! program we've been working to implement this year.*

*I walk in and find Michelle and Amy already seated at a little round table in the center of the classroom. They have their computers out and open and are in the middle of discussing a project that has Michelle really excited. Michelle is a classroom teacher at Broadmoor, Amy is the new Broadmoor instructional coach. Both have been instrumental in helping get the Be a Leader! program up and running this school year.*

*“Good morning, you two,” I say, as I enter the room. Taking my seat at one of four stools at the table.*

*“Good morning,” they say, almost in unison.*

*“So,” begins Amy, “How bad is it?”*

*“Ha,” I chuckle. “Who said it's bad?”*

*“That’s just what we’ve heard. We’re hoping it’s not.”*

*I hand them each a copy of the survey results, with the comments section dog-eared.*

*I shake my head. “I don’t have any idea how and why this place is so prone to gossip. That’s too bad if there are already stories out there about the results, when we’ve not even had a chance to discuss them together. Oh well... Anyway, there are some comments that I think we need to discuss specifically related to Be a Leader! I’ll give you a chance to look over everything.”*

*Amy and Michelle open their copies to the comments section and take a few minutes to read through the twenty, or so, individual comments from Broadmoor teachers that were included with the survey results. Of the twenty remarks shared, seven spoke directly to Be a Leader! and revealed how some of the Broadmoor staff are feeling at this implementation juncture.*

*“Oh my gosh!” says Michelle. “This makes me so mad!”*

*“Which one?” I ask.*

*She reads from the survey, “It is my opinion that there are staff members who are not forthcoming with information regarding Leader in Me because of potential disapproval from the principal.” She pauses, looks at me, smiles and shakes her head, before continuing. “This program is not what I thought it would be when it was first discussed last spring. I feel as though the leadership from the Be a Leader! staff is lacking considering the money that was spent. I have a deep concern with the money that was spent and potentially will be spent on the Be a Leader! program. It is my recommendation that we take some of the good resources and ideas we’ve collected from learning about this program for 2 years and implement that in our own classrooms or as a building, but it is NOT necessary to spend the money and time implementing*

*this program for the next few years. Most importantly, this program takes time and energy away from our focus on education inside the classroom. Furthermore, I'm not convinced Be a Leader! is in the best interest of the students at Broadmoor."*

*"Wow!" Amy echoes. "That's just ridiculous! I'm at a total loss."*

*I sigh. "Yeah, well, let's not get too defeated, ok? As I cautioned our PTA president, be wary of the vocal minority. We're not sure that's how everyone feels."*

*Amy, the more animated of the two, says, "I just love how people can hide behind surveys. I mean, how many times have we held meetings, or sent out surveys to staff, asking them how they're feeling and how we can best support them? And, nothing! Never a thing! It's all thumbs up! But then when the PTA sends something out, well, then we take our opportunity for some shots. Just ridiculous!"*

*I nod. "I think that's the part that bothers me most, too. I am not the least bit surprised some are choosing to share how they really feel in an anonymous survey, and you shouldn't either. I just wish they'd not chosen to do so in a community communication. It just screams that we're all disconnected on this end. I don't like the optics."*

*Michelle reads again from the survey, "Oh, I love this one. Many teachers are not on board with Be a Leader! at Broadmoor. Teachers do not feel free to give their thoughts for fear of repercussion. Attention seems to be taken away from the task at hand—educating the children of our school. We do not think it is fiscally responsible to pay for a packaged, rebranded program we could easily implement without spending the money."*

*"Repercussions? That's outrageous!" Amy chimes in. "Repercussions from whom? I can't believe these people!"*

*“Alright. Alright. I know the feedback is difficult to hear, but isn’t it good to know what we’re up against? I agree, I feel we’ve spent ample time ensuring that this is something all are on board with, but sounds like we still have work to do. I wonder if there’s any way to identify who made these comments. If we knew that, we may be able to make some personal connections.”*

*“Respectfully,” says Amy, “I really don’t think they deserve it. I guarantee these people who are undermining this whole thing, are the very ones who’ve not even opened the book or logged into the website. Why do those people get to decide for the rest of us? Why do they always get to win?”*

*“No one has won anything, and I certainly don’t want to hear from you two anything about throwing in the towel. We’ve put in too much work to just throw up our hands now. Nope. I think this just makes us have more resolve, and it provides us with some perspective. This program requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. That means we have some additional consensus building to do, is all.”*

*Michelle has been quiet for much of the conversation. She is a friendly and positive teacher but is new to this whole teacher-leader gig. I’m wondering if she thinks this feedback somehow reflects on her efforts.*

*“Hey,” I say to Michelle.*

*She looks in my direction.*

*“You’re killing it. You hear me? This is just a tough group. I told you from the outset. Change of this scope just takes time. It’s easy to be discouraged, but let’s remember why we’re doing this. Our Be a Leader! survey data screamed our students need this and so do our teachers. Let’s stick to our guns. Stay positive!”*

*Michelle nods. "Ok. I will." She pauses for a minute. "You know what I think is funny? You've been giving me such a hard time over these past several months because I keep saying that Be a Leader! has potential mostly due to the fact it's not a so-called 'Steve thing'."*

*I smile.*

*"Yet. Here are staff, likely the very ones who said that they liked the 'no-Steve-thing' appeal, who are now putting it on you that if they don't do it it'll make you upset. That's gotta be tough to hear."*

*I shrug. "It's par for the course, Michelle. I don't like it, no. Of course not. And I can't help but think it speaks volumes about how some people see me. But I've had enough conversations over the past year to know people are being a bit reckless with the word 'we'. I think some of the Broadmoor staff would really take issue with a few speaking for the whole group."*

*Amy pipes in, "So, what's next? I mean, we share these comments with everyone, right? Everyone should see what those people said to the parents."*

*"You know," I ponder out loud, "I've thought about that. I don't think we do share them. What's the utility in that? What if instead we just acknowledge that comments were shared that suggest we have additional support to give? Would that be less incendiary than standing up in a staff meeting and sharing the comments themselves? Let's not find ourselves meeting the professional standard set by someone else. Let's take the high road here. That's my suggestion."*

*"Yep," Michelle agrees. "I think that's the best course. I was so excited about this for our school. I want to keep myself in the positive. It's too easy to be cynical, and I don't want that."*

*“Fine,” Amy says, a bit reluctantly. “I’d still like to give those handful an earful from me. I’m going to need today to just process. I’ll be good. Promise.”*

*“I probably don’t say it enough, but I really appreciate and admire all of the work you’ve done with this whole thing. It’s a long, arduous road. But when was the last time we actually saw something through? We are always deterred when the going gets tough. Let’s try something different this time.”*

*I stand, close my computer and gather my papers together. “Michelle, I’ll take your car duty this morning, if you guys want to hash over things for a few minutes without me. Remember, let’s keep these survey results to ourselves. Can I trust you to do that?” I say this a bit facetiously because they know I trust them, unflinchingly.*

*“Yes,” they both say. “Of course, you can trust us.”*

Knight (2011) states,

Partners do not decide for each other. They decide together. In a true partnership, one partner does not tell the other what to do; they discuss, dialogue, and then decide together. Partners realize that they are one half a whole, and in healthy partnerships they find that they are a lot smarter when they listen to their partner...when they recognize their partner as an equal. (p. 20)

This chapter seeks to package all that I’ve learned in this research venture of mine. In an attempt to provide focus and clarity, see where these research dots connect, I’m emerging from the veritable fog that is the enterprise of school improvement hoping to present some summary findings. I’ll concede that what I present here may appear disjointed, perhaps wandering, lacking some expected brevity and coherence. This is not for want of trying, rather I think it



more accurately speaks to where my head usually lives. In so many ways then, this may well be the most difficult chapter to write. After all, is there anything truly conclusive in this business?

I began with the following research questions:

1. What is the potential of models like Impact Schools for school improvement in my school as outlined by Knight (2011)? What are the barriers that inhibit implementation?
2. What is the difference between partnership (Knight, 2011) as described in the literature and my lived experience as a practicing building principal?
3. Where does trust exist as a key component to the larger social endeavor of school improvement and culture building in my school?

A primary aim of my research is to contribute to the larger conversation about the principalship, school improvement, school culture, trust, and relationships with teachers. I will proceed by sharing some lessons learned and reflections from this research experience. I will outline possible recommendations for other researchers and practitioners and will identify next steps for me as a principal and a principal-researcher.

### **A Word About Reform and Change**

Principals are constantly working to inspire, motivate, evaluate, and review. Schools are living organisms, and principals are often the on-site doctor working steadfastly to provide response, diagnose, and prescribe answers to the health status in our schools. Since arriving at Broadmoor six years ago, I've campaigned to establish a professional culture that places student achievement as our highest priority through efforts that involve our community stakeholders and make teachers purposeful partners in our school improvement efforts. Yet, despite my sincere efforts to make teachers partners in this important work, I still feel my experience has been that

reform undertakings with this emphasis, no matter the merit or promise, have led to little true culture change, and an absence of genuine partnership persists. It would be easy to absolve myself of much of the responsibility where these issues are concerned and just assign the accountability to those with whom I associate dissent. I could use verbal bayonets like *intransigent, naysayer, fixed-mindset, resistor*, to describe people or behaviors that have inhibited my administrative goals. Indeed, I have observed this very behavior with some of the principals I work alongside. When things aren't going as we'd hoped they would, it is pretty typical to first ascribe blame elsewhere. However, my research has reminded me how little utility there is in this pejorative sentiment. Furthermore, I identify the professional maturation it denies a person whose charge it is to inspire movement in others.

Before examining a bit about myself and my professional growth sustained in this research, before interrogating a bit more the idea of partnership and social capital, it is important to spend some time discussing some lessons learned and accentuated regarding reform in schools, at least as they live through my eyes as a practicing principal.

A colleague recently introduced me to a very timely read, *So Much Reform, So Little Change* by Charles Payne (2008). While the book intends to primarily discuss and examine why reform efforts fail in urban school environments, I see so many parallels to the working conditions at a resource-rich school like Broadmoor and have come to believe these are things to which all schools are susceptible.

Payne (2008) begins with the astute observation, "For social scientists, the newest members of a social setting often make the best informants; they 'see' things that older inhabitants have come to take for granted" (p. 17). I like this idea that as a nascent ethnographer, I'm able to reenter my professional world at Broadmoor and see things with fresh eyes. I admit

that too often I'm so preoccupied with the *doing* part of my job that I don't take time to step back from the hamster-wheel and just consider. There's value in the pausing and the reflection. This research undertaking has permitted then a rare, and much-needed, chance for me to review my role and my principal behaviors. I've done my best to do so objectively, and I enter and exit my research humbly admitting to taking a great deal for granted.

Payne (2008) acknowledges the challenges reformers face, particularly with respect to change efforts, and asserts schools that struggle to implement reforms may be victims of "dimensions of demoralization" (p. 18) that are the product of work circumstances and the way schools are generally governed. Describing characteristics of a "demoralized" school culture, Payne (2008) writes:

It means that expertise inside the building is likely to be underutilized, and expertise coming from outside is likely to be rejected on its face. It means that well-thought-out programs can be undermined by the factionalized character of teacher life or by strong norms that militate against teacher collaboration. It means that schools are unlikely to learn from experiences; it is difficult to learn from people who one does not respect. It means that we have to think differently about the timeline for change. Many programs may have to spend the first year or two of implementation doing nothing but trying to cut through the social underbrush, trying to establish working networks. (p. 39)

While I do not believe that Broadmoor is a demoralized culture, per se, I do believe we've experienced periods of so-called demoralization. Demoralization is a terribly strong word but perhaps it can come in degrees; perhaps there are shades of demoralization, if you will. The attributes (as described above) of the demoralization Payne (2008) addresses are, unfortunately, some of the cultural attributes that I am witnessing as we undertake our Be a Leader! initiative

here at Broadmoor. They were likely the reasons other well-intentioned efforts like Impact Schools (Knight, 2011) also failed to be continued. Payne (2008) identifies the following “micropolitical barriers to school change” (p. 40):

1. Perception of principal patronage, favoritism
2. Tendency to protect existing power arrangements, formal or informal
3. Pattern of contested or stalemated power among principal, teachers, unions, others
4. Staff not willing to take part in decision-making
5. Principal not open to criticism; inability of principal to understand how he or she is perceived by staff
6. Reluctance to talk about certain issues for fear of offending the principal, other powerful actors. (Payne, 2008, p. 40)

I have, for example, observed our staff express an interest in more school-level opportunities to contribute and have a voice (i.e., the Be a Leader! survey). However, they seem to not always know best what to do with this gesture of shared decision-making. This is the product, surely, of many contributing factors. I wonder, for example, what residual repercussions exist from failed school improvement attempts I’ve facilitated, like Impact Schools (Knight, 2011), for instance. Snyder (2017) again:

Principals in demoralized schools know perfectly well that some of the people being invited to share power are going to use it in vindictive and disruptive ways, at least at first. Small wonder that many principals go through a stage of democratic pretense during which they mouth the rhetoric of sharing power while, in fact, finding a variety of ways to control what actually happens, reinforcing staff skepticism about reform rhetoric. (p. 43)

When a culture experiences these moments or periods of demoralization, participants within that organization will often display behaviors that may further erode the culture, worsening or compounding any issues associated with trust, and making all the more difficult any attempt at implementation.

Fullan (1985) on school-level reform, reminds readers and leaders:

It is the principal's role to help create the climate (collegiality, communication, trust) and mechanisms (time and opportunity, interaction, technical sharing and assistance, ongoing staff development) for supporting the implementation of innovations...Remember that learning to be proficient at something new involves initial anxiety, a variety of assistance, small experiences of success, incremental skill development, and eventually conceptual clarity and ownership. (p. 409)

Referencing Fullan (2001), Lee and Min (2017), remind the reader of the, “potential for drop in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings—a phenomenon he refers to as an ‘implementation dip’” (Lee & Min, 2017, p. ?). They (Lee & Min, 2017) assert that, rather than fearing these periods when individual performance becomes static or decreases, we should see it as an entirely natural part of organizational change.

The Broadmoor journey to adopt and implement *Be a Leader!* comprised an entire chapter of this research study and served as analogy for the school improvement work assigned to many practicing building leaders. Whole-school change efforts are no small feat and are not for the leadership “faint of heart”. They require tenacity, vision, compromise, persistence, dialogue, and a heavy helping of patience. This research has provided me such a valuable opportunity to audit my missteps, consider more effective strategy, and find resolve. It is natural

for principals to give up on the arduous work of school improvement when the going gets tough. The commitment required for whole-school change necessitates not only an unwavering drive but also an enlightened knowledge of the natural ebbs and flows of school change and the obstacles that can inhibit any organizational broad-scale movement.

I've also grown far wiser when it comes to the politics that also occupy the conversation. Green and McShane (2018) make the dictum, "The time has come for all of us to recognize that education is an inherently political enterprise" (Green & McShane, 2018, p. 47). My research and the Broadmoor Be a Leader! pursuit have given me a whole new appreciation for how true this statement is and how I need to not only understand it but also develop skills to traverse it. After all, "Politics is the final arbiter of the success or failure of any given policy, teaching strategy, or school improvement model" (Green & McShane, 2018, p. 49).

Working to improve practice at the school or district level is a messy and uncertain process, requiring coordinated efforts by disparate groups of people...Local politics is often too dysfunctional, and relying on a grassroots political process can seem like a painfully slow and inadequate way to address students' needs. On the other hand, without the buy-in, input, support, and elbow grease of the people actually doing the work at the ground level, no school improvement strategy will succeed, no matter how elegant its design. (Green & McShane, 2018, p. 48)

Naturally, the question is why? Why do we continue to repeat past failures? What can leaders do about this tendency? I have come to a couple of conclusions that I believe are important. I would also assert that my experience would suggest few in my role spend the necessary time considering these important ideas.

## **A Word About Threat Rigidity**

First, I find myself absorbed and enthralled by the idea of school threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009). I believe that the competing priorities that bombard and influence well-intentioned school improvement activity—Olsen and Sexton (2009) refer to it as a “besieged work environment” (p. 15)—lead to organizational dysfunction and a myriad of related issues. Pressures from outside of the organization, be they top-down edicts from the district-level, parent expectations, inherited power dynamics, initiative fatigue, or simply the public perception of the intent of school, all confound reasonable groups who should all otherwise be working toward the same end. “Conformity, efficiency, and standardization measures decrease individuals’ perceptions of their value to the organization,” remind Olsen and Sexton (2009, p. 15).

Olsen and Sexton (2009) identify three primary complaints from teachers in their research study on threat rigidity:

One is that the chosen and implemented school reforms were not good ones; the later-career teachers were more likely than newer teachers to level this complaint. The second concerned the manner in which those reforms were decided and implemented—that is, how the administration mandated restrictive changes while preaching democratic reform, teacher buy-in, and consensus building...and the third complaint was that the school administration generally ‘clamped down’ on teachers and students in such draconian ways as to lower morale and anger teachers. (p. 21)

In other words, a principal may have nothing but the best of intentions with reform proposals, but as the above mentioned indicates, the staff perception about what is actually occurring may be something altogether different. Similarly, a principal may demonstrate behaviors they wouldn’t have otherwise as a product of the threat rigidity to which they are exposed. Ours then is a

collective, unwitting, maladaptive response to the psychological duress placed on us. We simply can't get out of our own way. Nor are we self-aware enough to realize it's even happening. As one staff member said about Broadmoor, "It's like our school is haunted!" I have come to believe that threat rigidity haunts many a school. An exorcism is available to educators, but only if we take care to first create awareness that it's needed.

### **A Word About Teacher Voice**

Second, I believe we simply don't spend enough time working to understand later-career teachers. Snyder (2017) provided me some validating perspective on this issue. It buttresses what I have wanted to understand about creating partnerships with this particularly critical staff demographic. "Implications for educational leader practice center on greater awareness of psychic rewards, social and political nostalgia, later-career teacher experience, and engaging teachers in clarifying conversations" (Snyder, 2017, p. 9). This idea of educational nostalgia (Snyder, 2017) is a recurring motif in my research (see my Wrigley Field journal entry). It speaks to, I believe, the requisite humanizing of our profession and the fact that teaching is such a personal extension of who one is. Snyder (2017) shares the insight that,

Social nostalgia accompanies changes that take away from, or change relationships with, colleagues and students. Political nostalgia on the other hand, arises from a loss of autonomy stemming from mandated, top-down initiatives. These initiatives particularly result in the loss of independence, creativity and status that veteran teachers once knew. (Snyder, 2017, p. 6)

When the tectonic plates of the profession shift, we can predict some staff will lose their footing. With respect to this issue, I believe a refined leadership lens would be of benefit. Understanding teacher behavior, sincerely engaging with it, not just naming it or lamenting it, is



a necessary leadership disposition. I like to refer to Broadmoor as a “destination school in a destination district.” As such, we do not have a great deal of staff turnover, and we are endowed with several later-career teachers. I’ll admit to previously having seen this attribute of our school as an obstacle to some of my leadership aims. This research has provided me necessary and revived perspective. Not only do I need to listen with more intention when a later-career teacher expresses discontent or concern about a new program or initiative (e.g., Be a Leader!), it would also be good practice to ensure that I provide this lens to other staff in the building, who may see later-career teacher behavior in a certain way. Lee and Min (2017) state:

Teachers are vital to the successful implementation of any educational innovation, but their relationship to implementation is a complicated one. Their perceptions, beliefs, and values in relation to the reform program—which together constitute their buy-in—are key ingredients for the success of any school reform initiative. (p. 372)

I have come to value more than ever Snyder’s (2017) recommendation of a “conversational approach” (p. 3) with later-career teachers, and teachers, in general. Perceived resistance may just be further occasion for important dialogue. “Built upon the constructivist model, this view of resistance sees resistance as an opportunity for learning, understanding and improving the change process” (Snyder, 2017, p. 3). As Snyder (2017) identifies, “resistance can take on numerous meanings based upon one’s theoretical framework” (p. 3). If I approach my work from the partnership approach and a social capital theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam; 2000), I maintain I am more likely to better hear the voice of the teachers with whom I work alongside, whose work and agency is critical to the improvement ambitions for our school, and see them for the resource they represent.

## **A Word About Partnership and Teacher Empowerment**

Maeroff (1988) writes,

As long as teachers are not adequately valued by themselves and by others, they are not apt to perform with the necessary assurance and authority to do the job as well as they can. If teachers can be lifted in three key areas—each of which complements the others—they will be able to flex muscles that have been allowed to atrophy. Those three areas involve their status, their knowledge, and their access to decision making. (p. 475)

When I arrived at Broadmoor six years ago, I brought with me a mindset and leadership disposition about the possibilities of teacher partnership inspired and informed by Jim Knight's (2011) Impact Schools model for improvement. As this research details, unfortunately, that whole-school improvement attempt was not sustained. Fast forward and we are working through a new whole-school initiative, Be a Leader!, that augments our school with similar opportunities for teacher voice and empowerment. I remain optimistic that authentic partnership is possible.

I believe there is ample room in our educational pursuits for words like *love*, *humility*, *respect*, *reciprocity*, and *hope* (Knight, 2011) when defining the type of working relationships that exist between the adults in a school. Indeed, these concepts describe the fundamental character of relationships in a partnership. They are also words that my research and experience would argue are conspicuously absent in schools, particularly in the domain that separates teachers and principals.

Knight's (2011) important work guides leaders to remember the important and complex characteristics of helping relationships, of motivation, of status. He reminds practitioners that teaching is a thinking enterprise at its core. "Today, many teachers are confronted with scripts and pacing guides they are told to follow to the letter, along with other well-intentioned but

problematic models for change. Not surprisingly, when the thinking is taken out of teaching, teachers resist” (p. 25).

Maeroff (1988) echoes this sentiment:

Teachers are hungry for stimulating educational experiences. If they did not care about learning, they would not have contemplated careers in the classroom. But they end up divorced from scholarship and devoid of time and incentives to continue to learn. (p. 476)

My research catalyzes my stance that an investment in teachers is critical to any reform effort or school improvement endeavor. There is simply just some work in schools that is best done together. Leading with a shared decision-making focus permits and encourages multiple perspectives, collaboration, and teacher leadership. It creates a culture that ensures we regularly venture to engage teachers in professional growth and offer sincere attempts at restoring agency to their work.

However, the creation of partnership, I’ve learned is complicated labor. For one, teacher empowerment can come at a price. If, for example, due to factors resulting from threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009) a school is experiencing a period of “demoralization” (Snyder, 2017), and the culture of the school is operating with a more adversarial temperament (Barth, 2006), empowering adults in a school can lead to issues of trust, competition, alienation, and can create additional divide.

Pugh and Zhao (2001) write about possible alienation and unintended consequences that emerge when empowering teachers. Teachers in their study were provided some opportunity at increased empowerment. This improved these teachers with a greater sense of commitment to the organization and investment in their own professional growth. However, they were met with

formidable barriers in the form of teacher/peer response, inherent organizational obstacles, and administrator entanglement (Pugh & Zhao, 2001). This led then to a feeling of disconnect.

We might say their hopes and expectations were raised only to have them dashed by reality. The result was alienation—feelings of negativity toward those realities (peers, administrators, organizations that dashed their hopes—which was manifest in these teachers’ attempts to dissociate themselves from the confining realities. (Pugh & Zhao, 2001, p. 199)

Principals then need to engage in work that addresses school culture dynamics simultaneous to partnership development and teacher empowerment. Maeroff (1988) declares, “The pursuit of empowerment need not be guerilla warfare. Teachers and administrators do not have to snipe at each other like members of rival gangs feuding over disputed terrain” (p. 476). I believe regular, consistent dialogue, transparency about educational aims, and a demonstrated, heartfelt investment in teachers’ professional growth, over time, remedies any potential pitfalls.

Allowing teachers access to the lofty towers of power requires the building of psychological ladders that they may climb to escape their isolation and to gain an overview that teachers do not ordinarily attain. It also requires connecting teachers with one another and with principals, building collegiality and a process of shared decision making that has been all too rare in the schools. (Maeroff, 1988, p. 476)

Of course, principals will have to do this important work of establishing teacher empowerment often in the face of opposition. As this research highlights, this opposition can come in the form of opinions of colleagues, supervisors, and even teachers themselves. Sentiments expressed that place teachers in quadrants, assertions about their motives and potentials, indeed the entire hierarchical nature of the way schools operate and are governed, all

contribute to how teachers and principals are bound to interact. It will take deliberate and premeditated effort on the part of principals, perhaps through improvement models like Impact Schools (2011) or Be a Leader! to effectively overcome much of what is inherent in our work.

I believe it can be done and should be done.

Knight (2011) poetically offers,

When we look at everyone else as a teacher and a learner, regardless of their credentials or years of experience, we will be delightfully surprised by new ideas, concepts, strategies, and passions. If we go in to an experience expecting to learn, much more often than not, we will. (p. 44)

### **A Word About Trust**

“Truly we are in a crisis of trust. It affects us on all levels—societal, institutional, organizational, relational, and personal—and it has a perpetuating effect” (Covey, 2006, p. 14).

As I explored issues related to threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009) and the barriers created in attempts at partnership development (Knight, 2011), I kept returning to wonderings about trust. “Low trust slows everything—every decision, every communication, and every relationship” reminds Covey (2006, p. 2).

There were several narratives written in this personal account that revealed a lack of trust between me and the teachers of Broadmoor. Honestly, I admit to having spent some time, unproductively, trying to determine if the culture I inherited when I arrived at Broadmoor was one of distrust, or was the absence of trust a product of specific things I’ve done.

Tschannen-Moran (2014) writes, “In a trusting environment, people may give one another the benefit of the doubt about questionable behaviors, whereas in an atmosphere of distrust similar actions or behaviors may serve to even further diminish a low level of trust” (p.

239). I recognize that the Broadmoor culture, perhaps as a result of threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009) factors, or perhaps as a result of my leadership behaviors, manifests tendencies where there is little giving of the benefit of the doubt. This may be revealed in staff responses to decisions I've made, or assertions about the motives of peers. It all unveils that issues related to trust are critical to additional examination at Broadmoor.

Kochanek (2005) identifies a really interesting attribute, I believe, of this entire trust conversation. The work of the building principal is such that we simply don't know and can't see everything. That's just a fact. The work in school is too layered, too complex, and too quickly paced to attend to all things at once. What then happens, I assert, is a whack-a-mole, or reactive approach to leadership. Kochanek (2005) describes this idea that principals are simply required to operate with a "logic of confidence" (p. 3), that presumes people are doing what they're supposed to unless we hear otherwise. "People have faith that others are doing what they are supposed to be doing. In an atmosphere where adequate performance is assumed rather than verifiable, degrees of competence are not discernable, and only gross incompetence is detected" (Kochanek, 2005, p. 3).

Consider this idea about a "logic of confidence" (Kochanek, 2005) and the precept that, "we judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior" (Covey, 2006, p. 14), and you realize how inherently difficult it is to maintain trusting relationships in schools. If a principal has simply too many things to concentrate on and take into consideration, what results is typically a "where there's smoke, there's fire" mode of operating. As those situations most often result in making a principal's job all the more difficult, and there is rarely the necessary time to dive deeper into intentions and true meaning behind situations, I believe many principals, myself included, jump to conclusions and these conclusions can be unfavorable and lead to

distrust. Similarly, a principal is consistently under scrutiny by all stakeholders (teachers, parents, district-office, and students). I have come to believe this is particularly true with teachers (exacerbated dramatically in a demoralized culture), and a principal is not even aware of the expectations they are failing to meet on a regular basis. Kochanek (2005) identifies that two circumstances lead to trust issues in schools—outright betrayal between members of the school team and a failure to meet expectations. It can come as little surprise then that when threat rigidity (Olsen & Sexton, 2009) factors aggravate school cultures and compromise teacher agency, when well-intentioned whole-school initiatives designed to increase teacher involvement but are met with skepticism and are not seen to fruition, when those adversely affect the perception of the work of others, trust can be greatly impaired.

Trust is a critical resource for schools; indeed, it is a key, distinguishing mark of leadership and relationships in successful schools. Accomplishing the mission of your school without trust is unlikely—perhaps even impossible. When trust has been disrupted, and when conflicts have resulted in feelings of betrayal, it is important that mechanisms be in place to help members of the school community restore their broken relationships. (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 247)

As my research documented, trust issues may be what is undermining our ability to accomplish the important work of school improvement at Broadmoor. I think the work of Covey (2006), Bryk and Schneider (2002, 2003), Kochanek (2005), and Tshannen-Moran (2014) should be required reading for practicing principals or anyone interested in school reform. There are valuable lessons and activities that are discussed that principals can use to assess trust levels in their schools, engage teachers in reflective exercises that bring to light the importance of the topic, and specific activities that principals can do to help repair trust where it's broken. There is

simply too little time spent, in my opinion, on this critical component of school life, and we do so at the peril of numerous attempts at improvement, rendering most then dead on arrival.

### **A Word About Autoethnography and Self-renewal**

I undertook this research study not only to better understand the nature of my work as principal, the inner-workings of school culture development specifically related to partnership establishment, and the pressing issue of trust as a key ingredient in all-things school, but also to step outside of my world and view my professional (and personal) self, anew. To that end, I elected to use autoethnography as my research methodology, framing the research within a layered account (Ronai, 1995). Kim (2016) reminds us, “A layered account is a juxtaposition between the author’s experience and relevant literature. It is a narrative form designed to present to the reader a continuous dialogue of experience between the author and the author’s self” (p. 209). I hope that what was presented here served the dual purpose of contributing to the prevailing scholarship of schools study, principal-teacher dynamics, etc., but that it also adequately stretched me professionally, so I surface from this experience inspired and rekindled to take on all that comes.

As I stand back and view this research enterprise, I am compelled to refer to the work of McGough (2003) and his article on a principal’s “learning story” (p. 450). McGough (2003) offers:

When considering a learning story, I am referring to the landscape of private inner dialogue within which the constructs of meaning as established over one's lifetime are organized and processed...I refer to it as a story to emphasize its linguistic and fluid nature. This private story is manifest in the public realm as a perspective, a worldview put into action, which comes forward most clearly when facing the need to manage



novelty. Such situations require us to engage in original learning, that is, to become aware of circumstances, to deliberate and construct possibilities, and to make choices for a course of action about non-routine conditions. (p. 449)

I concede then that my learning story is still a work in progress, as well it should be. However, this is simultaneously (and paradoxically) both a leadership strength and shortcoming. I am driven by convictions that represent my learning story and the professional and personal context that has shaped my life to this point. Recreating episodes of my learning story that found their way into this research account, allowed me precious terrain with which to reflect on my leadership behaviors. So then, to what extent does this autoethnographic endeavor restore agency to my work?

Geertz (1995, in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) shares this perspective:

What we can construct, if we keep notes and survive, are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things that seem to have happened pieced-together patternings, after the fact....It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go. (p. 6)

I entered this research having felt more-than-ready and confident to speak well to the advantages of partnership and in making the argument that providing teachers with agency will positively impact our collective efforts. However, I exit, at least in terms of this formal research study, conceding I'm still in the process of learning how truly difficult this work is.

The autoethnographic writing that I engaged in throughout the course of this research

provided me an uncommon experience to interrogate my role as a building principal. Through this act of self-exploration and reflection, I was able to not only better know myself as a principal but also as a person. Remembering my audience as likely largely a professional one, I chose to exclude personal narratives that were particularly evocative and revealing, but I did engage in writing them, and this act alone provided me invaluable insight. My stories (included or omitted here) have had profound influence on my regard for the work I do and for the people I'm privileged to work with. With respect to personal narratives, Riessman (2008) shares, "They do not merely describe what someone does in the world but what the world does to that someone" (p. 22).

I'm struck by the realization that my principal conscience remains sometimes frustratingly inconsistent, incongruous, and pliable, and is under regular, persistent attack. Reading back through my reflections, some of which I elected to include in this paper, others omitted, there were times when I was proud of decisions I made or courses of actions I took. Other times, I felt exposed, an imposter. I sometimes felt ashamed and hesitant to share for fear of admitting my vulnerabilities. Then, I would also have moments where I'd let myself off the hook, realizing I'm only human after all, just a guy with a title, susceptible to mistakes just like any other. In other words, this partnership-believer simply doesn't always make decisions that are in keeping with the very tenets to which I claim I subscribe.

Thus, in coming to make sense of and resolve the unique problems we face in our personal and professional realms, we activate a conception about how the world works and our role within it that is grounded in a set of private inner dialogues formed and transformed over a lifetime. Of course, our actions in the world do not necessarily follow in a direct and linear fashion from our worldview. Thus, one's perspective, as I mean to

use the term here, refers to the praxis of one's conceptions, the typical and distinctive ways in which we each act within and upon the world. A second premise is that the learning story serves as a co-constructive mediator to one's everyday agency in the world...An amazing feature of such private subjective representations is that they are both influenced by and can alter one's external reality. They are, in essence, meaning-rich private stories that influence what we learn from our environment and how we learn to affect our environment. (McGough, 2003, p. 449)

I've been a practicing building principal for over a decade. I've read numerous books and articles about leadership and school improvement. I've attended myriad professional learning experiences presumably aimed at forming within me a certain disposition toward the principalship. While all of these have certainly made an impact, to some extent, I've come to realize how illusive authentic principal voice endures in these opportunities. I'm hoping then that this autoethnographic exercise bestows on existing scholarship a perspective from someone intimately engaged in the work itself. I'm hopeful a reader can then not only exit this research with a greater knowledge of the work of the principal, but also the important work taking place in schools. I contend additional opportunity exists to hear the voice of principals and that autoethnography serves as an especially unique and promising means by which to accomplish this.

This autoethnography, I'm realizing, in the end, is also as much about the consequential service of teachers, as much as it is about me, or me as a principal, or principal-researcher. This research has afforded me a vital chance to review literature relevant to issues related to school improvement, culture building, teacher behavior, principal/teacher relationships, reform and change, and trust. So much important learning was provided me in this research, all of it

critically relevant to the work we're doing in schools. I continue to be perplexed as to why this learning is not something to which principals are regularly exposed. Similarly, teachers seem to be decoupled from opportunities to look more critically at their work. Studies that focus on teacher and principal access to and engagement with research literature would be of great benefit to the larger scholarship on school improvement.

As a practicing school principal, what are next steps for me as a result of this research effort? First, I know I will definitely look at teacher behavior differently. I have maintained for some time that I believe in the partnership approach, but this research has revealed the fact that I don't always behave that way. In fact, some of my behaviors are directly antithetical to the very thing to which I claim I subscribe. I've also read some really important work on reform, change, and trust. I intend to invite staff and some of my principal colleagues to engage with that material. As it has for me, I believe it has potential to make a similar impact on them and their practice. Lastly, as I consider next steps required for our Be a Leader! Work at Broadmoor, I want to address more deliberately the issue of trust. I intend to address this topic first with our leadership team, get their advice on how best to proceed, and then work with the staff to have some productive dialogue around the topic and participate in some of the exercises I have come across in my study.

I've tremendous respect for my audience, be they future researchers, aspiring or experienced principals, teachers, or reformers. I humbly surrender I'm a far better principal than I am ethnographer and that, as a result, I may have failed to adequately, compellingly, captured all that I aimed to with this research.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) write:

The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into a world or experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. (in Riessman, 2008, p. 192)

I hope then that my audience will give me the necessary grace required to receive me as I am, however incomplete, unprepared, and inadequate that may be. I submit we are all a work in progress, as they say. But, honestly, I think there is something cathartic in admitting that. I think it's something most of us can relate to, and it also suggests possibility.

We are all just trying, after all.

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## **Timeline**

- Proposal meeting was held Tuesday, December 3, 2019.
- Dissertation defense, March 31, 2020.