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A View From Within: A School Founder's View of Educating Children from the Inside Out

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Running Head: EDUCATING CHILDREN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

A VIEW FROM WITHIN:
A SCHOOL FOUNDER'S PORTRAIT OF "EDUCATING CHILDREN FROM THE INSIDE
OUT"

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Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership (Ed.D.)

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of the requirements of
Doctor of Education

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EDUCATING CHILDREN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The signature page

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ABSTRACT

The media and political affiliations often color the view of charter schools within different sectors of the community. However, there is no argument that there is much to be done improve achievement in our public school systems across the country, especially those who educate high numbers of often marginalized populations. This study looks at one charter school in Chicago, Illinois, which has a focused mission and vision to “Educate Children from the Inside Out.” It examines the school through the social science portraiture method. Data collection includes interviews with current and former staff and students, observations, review of school documents, and reflections of the writer who also founded the school but currently works in another setting. In creating the school’s portrait, the methods of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot are highly utilized to find common themes and trends that highlight the successful practices, which undergird the school’s overall positive affect on students. Through the voices of alumni more than 10 years after their education began at the school, the teachers who spent more than a decade creating and serving it and the parents who took a chance on a new school and enrolled their kids in an unproven entity, themes for school success emerged. As the school embarks on yet another difficult transition in leadership, the hope is that these trends can help solidify ongoing practices within the school that led to success with this diverse student population.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Elise and Gabrielle Rothstein who approach each day with a wonder and excitement I hope to bring to my work daily. My daughters are forever curious and always supportive no matter how long I used to spend as the leader of Namaste and now in the library writing about the experiences therein. These young girls give me hope that happiness and success can still exist simultaneously within the walls of educational institutions.

I also dedicate this study to the founding staff at Namaste Charter School. Without you, there would be no dissertation and no Namaste. The trials and tribulations you have endured to build an institution with high moral and academic standards are tremendous. *You* are the glue that held me together. *You* are the fundamental element that created change and an incredibly unique school. *You* are my superheroes, and thousands of students have benefitted from your commitment, drive, and dedication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There have been many people who have been instrumental to both my interest and commitment to this topic and study, and to my logistical completion of this project over the past several years. First, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Michael Rothstein who I met in the summer before I opened Namaste Charter School in 2004, the capsule that encompasses much of my professional accomplishments and the subject of this dissertation. He endured late nights with crying children and weekends where I spent more time in the school or library than in my own home and with my family. He allowed my computer in the delivery room twice so that I could remain connected to Namaste. Without him, this school and study could have never come to be.

I also acknowledge my parents, Barry and Charlyn Slade who set me on the path to believing the importance of education and of overcoming obstacles. My father, in particular, had a huge effect on my ability to even open Namaste, and his dedication to helping the school get off the ground was truly incredible. He was like a founding staff member and continued to give me the strength and ability to succeed by providing moral support, jokes at appropriate and inappropriate times, and when needed a trip to Home Depot to rent a wet vacuum no matter how many times the school basement flooded.

Over the years, I have had the extreme pleasure of working with some of the most esteemed colleagues in the field of education, and also had wonderful mentors on this most recent path towards my doctorate. Specifically, Don Monroe, a great friend and mentor who always found a way to push me ahead and give me the strength to keep going even when I wanted to stop. Doug Porter, Cathy Calhoun, and many other Namaste board members over the years kept their commitment and entrusted their faith in me to operate this special institution.

More recently, Harrington Gibson my National Louis Professor and Dissertation Chair has provided invaluable guidance and feedback throughout this process and was the first one to connect me to the methodology I chose. The support and knowledge has sustained me to make it this far.

And, once again, I have to acknowledge every single board member, staff member, student, family member, or supporter of Namaste over the past 15 years. From a small, round table in the kitchen of Allison Jack's home to the large imposing structure that exists on Paulina Street today, the creation of Namaste Charter School is an honest testament to the hard work and commitment of an ever-growing team. In particular, the significant contributions made by many who served on my administrative team over the years, and of course those who work on the front lines every day: the teachers, teaching assistants, office staff, development staff, facilities, operations, cafeteria staff, and every school-based partner. Every person who has graced the halls of the school has made an effect on the school that exists today. I am grateful to every person for bringing his or her best selves to work, even when it was so difficult.

Lastly, I acknowledge the great work ahead in the "puberty years" of Namaste and the great commitment of the school's new school leader. The incredible passion with which she approaches her work is admirable, and despite the current struggle, I have no doubt that she can resurrect the success found therein.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT i

DEDICATION ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii

Table of Contents v

CHAPTER ONE 1

Introduction 1

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review 9

 Charter School History 9

 Charter Schools in Chicago 10

 The Charter School Debate 11

 The Quality Debate 12

 Equity Concerns 13

 Successful Charter School Practices 17

 Use of Portraiture in Education Research 18

 Current Political Reality 20

 Synthesis and Conclusion 21

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology 22

 Qualitative Research Design 22

 Portraiture 22

 Data Gathering Techniques 23

 Portrait Context 25

 School Location 26

Demographics	27
Language Programing.....	27
Sampling	27
Alumni Students.....	28
Parents.....	29
Staff.....	30
Data Analysis	31
Authenticity.....	31
Authenticity.....	31
CHAPTER FOUR: Namaste Charter School	34
Teacher/Student Relationships.....	40
Teacher Credibility	42
School Culture	45
Rituals	51
Mission, Vision, and Values	54
Relational Trust and High Expectations for Staff.....	57
Teachers' Expectations of Students.....	59
Collective Efficacy.....	63
Adult Time and Feedback.....	66
Family Engagement	70
School Building and Grounds.....	75
The Name.....	79
The Day at Namaste: Lessons Learned.....	81

CHAPTER FIVE: Implications for Leadership..... 84

 Accepting Imperfections..... 84

 Improving Collective Efficacy..... 89

 Advanced Teacher Influence 91

 Goal Consensus..... 92

 Teachers' Knowledge About Each Other's Work 92

 Cohesive Staff..... 93

 Leadership..... 94

 Effective Systems of Intervention..... 97

 Partnering with Families and the Community 98

 Navigating Leadership Transition..... 100

References..... 102

APPENDIX A..... 106

APPENDIX B 108

APPENDIX C 109

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a White, middle class girl growing up in the suburbs of Chicago being a teacher was not an original aspiration of mine. Although I grew up in a two-parent working household, I had what I thought were “larger” aspirations. Teaching was not a profession to which many students in my town aspired, as becoming a doctor or a lawyer was perceived as a more desired outcome. My maternal grandparents lived close to us their entire lives (which encompassed the entirety of my childhood through and beyond college), and they instilled the great virtue and values that came from raising their own family, including my mother, in a solidly working class environment. My grandfather held three jobs for most of his young adult life, and my mother often had to “cover up” this fact from each of his bosses when they were looking for him to come in to pick up an extra shift from time to time. Far into his own adulthood, my grandfather partnered with my father (his son-in-law) and my uncle (his own son) to open a truly “home grown” business, which spent 25 years growing and prospering in our sheltered community, an auto parts store which grew from one to four locations in the span of their existence. Although all of the male grandchildren worked in the store during their summers and time off, the females (of which I was the first), did not.

My mother, to whom I probably owe much of my own tenacity and “grit,” spent decades as a neo-natal intensive care nurse. She obtained her master’s degree in nursing administration when I was in grade school spending nights writing as I am now at my dining room table while I as a young child repeatedly emerged from my bedroom for another drink of water, a hug, or affirmation of no monsters in my closet. Shortly thereafter, she became well known as the lead nursing administrator at a major suburban hospital where she supervised the construction of one

of the area's leading hospitals for children.

As a teenager, I recall walking through the mall when mothers would run up to my mom embracing her and asking if she remembered them. Their children, many of whom were much older than I, had been in her care for weeks, months, and sometimes even years, as they were born in a different era of medical technology where they clung to life for a large portion of their infancy. When I was in junior high, I remember the opening of this new hospital wing where all of the children born in the neo-natal nursery for the past 20 years were invited to witness the “birth” of a new hospital wing. There, literally, dozens of families with teenagers who had overcome immeasurable health odds attended, and every single one of them knew exactly who my mother was. It filled my heart even then to see how this one person affected the lives of so many in a positive and unforgettable way. But for me, I could not handle the site of blood, or basically any other bodily fluid, so I knew that the medical profession was not for me.

I went to a phenomenal high school, which I never recognized at the time. I was a “good” student and found comfort in some extracurricular activities from synchronized swimming to performing with the drama team in individual events competitions, but I often wondered between social groups trying to find and define myself. I ended up attending Washington University in St. Louis, which was NOT my first choice, as Brown University did not accept me. I knew I could get a solid base, which would likely carry me onto law school since almost everyone I knew from high school wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer. However, during my years at Wash U, I had a profound experience, which at time I could never predict and put me on the trajectory to founding my own high performing, diverse, health and dual-language focused charter school.

I spent 8 months studying at the Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile and living with a family in a tiny two-bedroom apartment in the center of town. My Chilean mother had two older

daughters (also in college) from a previous marriage, and I had a 6-year old sister living with my Chilean parents and me. At the time, I had a vocabulary in Spanish that was about as robust as Macarena, my Chilean 6-year old sister. For the first time in my entire life, I was without power and privilege. I could not speak the language, didn't know the systems, culture, and expectations, and spent the first 3 months showering in the cold as I didn't realize you needed to light a pilot light in order to get hot water.

My Chilean dad was fascinated with my Jewish roots and would attribute all of my "good" behaviors as an exchange student to the fact that I was Jewish, something he had only read about in books as a philosophy student. While mostly in an environment that mirrored my own experiences in a distinct cultural context and being at a private university, my daily experiences gave me a new appreciation for the role. It helped me to understand what education and educational privilege can play in the lives of children, especially in the lives of children without power and privilege. I worked hard to fully learn the language and customs in Santiago and within my "family," where once again hard work and commitment reigned supreme. I experienced education and life as an outsider learning the system and rules while I learned the content.

When I returned to Washington University, I became more interested in learning about Latin America and the role of language and poverty in the international education system. I became a double major in Spanish and Latin American Studies and yearned to find a role in my newfound cultural commitment. Upon graduation, I joined Teach for America; an organization that sends recent college graduates to under-resourced schools and districts across the country to teach for a minimum of 2 years. In Houston, my life trajectory was changed forever.

What I experienced in schools in Chile, I often attributed to the fact that it was a less-

developed educational system than the highly touted educational system in the United States. However, my experiences in Houston reinforced the realization learned throughout my experiences that the wide gap in academic and socio-emotional outcomes between minority, low-income students, and their white, higher-income peers is not only extremely disparate but also problematic if we actually believe that all students deserve have access to a high quality education. As a child and young adult, I was sheltered from the inequities that exist across the educational spectrum. However, through my experiences as a first grade teacher in inner city Houston, I was confronted with these realities on a day-to-day basis. My students were bright and capable, and their parents were engaged and committed, but the mind-set around me was dark, reinforcing of racial, and socioeconomic stereotypes, which I had never encountered.

As a young teacher, I was fascinated with helping to build the background knowledge of my students. I was immediately taken with the fact that most of them had never left the less than one-mile radius around their small neighborhood. I spent weekends taking these students to the circus, the science museum, even baseball games where I didn't have the opportunity to root for my hometown "Cubbies." And, for all of these outings, my more experienced teacher colleagues often chastised me. I didn't know it at the time, but there was a distinct research base being developed around the importance of building relationships and developing trust with these low-income, minority students to help further their academic and socio-emotional growth (Brewster & Raisback, 2003; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Leithwood, 2002).

After 2 years, it was bittersweet for me to leave Houston to return to my home town in Chicago where I had decided that the influence I could have in my classroom was simply not enough—I needed to have a larger affect. I was often held back by the consternation I felt from my colleagues and realized the whole school environment needs to embrace this mentality of “all

students, every day” and that as a second year teacher in a highly bureaucratic system, I could not directly influence. At the time, I thought this may be a role in policy making or at a district or statewide level and therefore proceeded to study Education Policy at the Harris School for Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago.

During my time at the Harris School, I again had the opportunity to experience power and privilege of being a the child of a middle to high income White family who planned for college where I learned from the top educators and policy makers in the country, including the man that would later become our 44th president of the United States, Barak Obama. I had the amazing fortune to work under Tony Bryk as a research assistant and literacy specialist at the Center for School Improvement (then known as CSI) at the University of Chicago. Bryk’s research (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006) is seminal on the essential supports that define growth producing educational environments. While I at first worked on research and policy advocacy, I was quickly pulled into the stark inequities that existed in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system once again through my work in under-resourced environments, which served mostly Latino students.

While studying full time at the University of Chicago, I worked full time as a literacy specialist working to create and implement a balanced literacy model that could be implemented across Chicago. I spent hours in other peoples’ classrooms. My studies and work across CPS almost forced me to go back to teaching after my graduate studies and work at CSI. Much of my work in Houston and then in Chicago often hit a “brick wall” when it came to educational funding. Almost every deficit I encountered was explained away by the lack of resources, primarily funding, at the district and/or school level. So, when I went back into the classroom, I wanted to serve the same low-income, Latino student population, but I also looked to find the

real reason behind the lack of performance of these subgroups, which I was sure was not wholly explained by finances.

As a teacher in North Shore School District 112 (NSSD 112), I taught in bilingual and dual language classrooms where my primary student base was exactly the same as in the city of Chicago. And there, money was no object. In the early 2000s, NSSD 112 had one of the highest per pupil spending amounts¹ across the state of Illinois. The latest books, technology, and facilities were equally available to all students in my school. The school, as a whole, was achieving; however, the curtain was pulled back with the revelations of No Child Left Behind, and the disaggregation of student achievement data by subgroups, where it became grossly apparent that the majority of students not meeting standards were low-income and Latino despite exposure to the very same resources. It was this experience, combined with my own history of educational advantage and understanding of the effect of high-quality teaching and learning environments (Sebring et al. 2006) that led me to found Namaste Charter School (Namaste).

My experiences as a White, privileged student and then as a White educator in mostly low-income, minority environments have allowed me opportunities to think deeply about a subgroup of students that is chronically underperforming. Although the disaggregation of data by subgroup is often reaffirming of this fact, I have experienced first-hand the effect of educator mind-set and professional development on the quality of teaching and learning in a school. It was my hope that through the creation of Namaste, we could combine best practices in teaching and learning with ongoing dedication to data collection, evaluation and analysis and a commitment to health and wellness, something often missing in schools, to model one method to address this

¹ National Center for Educational Statistics (www.nces.gov)

disturbing reality. Throughout my dissertation inquiry, I hope to gain additional insight into the views of all stakeholders on what truly positively affected student performance in this type of language and socioeconomically challenged environment.

Although there are some recent examples of effective practices for these low-income, Latino students (Merseeth, 2009), additional documentation of successful teaching practices for these students is needed to continue to change their educational trajectory. Building on the work of other scholars like Katherine Merseeth and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, I investigate the academic and socio-emotional teaching strategies and their perception by students, teachers, and families in the founding years of Namaste. By investigating the perspectives of these constituents, along with a review of the recent research on successful urban charter schools, I hope to add to the research which focuses on a dual role of schools: to create both places of academic rigor and the development of the human spirit, mind and body.

From the perspective of teachers, students and families, these same constituencies can see, feel and experience representations of exemplary practice and pedagogy that can then be implemented in a more widespread manner. It is my hope that this inquiry into Namaste's ten-year history of success can help others think about how they can achieve similar kinds of academic and life success by customizing their instruction and utilizing proven and sometimes unique pedagogical philosophies.

This study documents the effect of Namaste Charter School's Six Pillars² on the mind-set of students, families, and the teaching community through the articulation of instructional

² Namaste Charter School's Six Guiding Pillars, as described on www.namastecharterschool.org, are as follows: Peaceful School Culture, Nutrition Health & Wellness, Movement, Language & Culture, Balanced Learning and Collaborative Practice. Described in detail in Appendix A

approaches and environmental expectations viewed by founding members of each constituency: parents, staff members, and students. Its purpose is to document and highlight the work of the founding leadership team, teachers, and staff members through telling detailed narratives that focus on examples of success and strength. Drawing on interview and school observational data, I construct a portrait of Namaste Charter School as an adolescent school after 13 years of operation that focuses on authentic representations of exemplary practice and pedagogy related to the six founding pillars of practice and the culture that created them.

This study documents the long-term experiences and practices of students, parents, and staff members in implementing a unique set of expectations that have proven to be successful in their quest to change the trajectory of these students' lives. In order to do so, I use social science portraiture as the method of inquiry and representation. This portrait will be created using data from interviews and observations deliberately looking for the good to highlight promising practices aligned with the methodology of portraiture. It is also intended to provide perspective as the founder, the author of the study, and transitions fully out of the school's day to day operations.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In order to develop a conceptual understanding of literature related to charter schools, I identified that it is critical to highlight the history, growth, similarities, and differences of charter schools and traditional public schools, and look briefly at the debate that exists around the actual quantitative success of charter schools, their frequently cited concerns over advantages, and discrepancies that exist between charter schools and traditional public schools, and highlight the substantial work already completed on successful charter schools. In turn, this review of existing literature will not only provide a thorough context for this research study, but will also illuminate that it will add specific details, stories and reasons for charter school triumph, specifically around the assertion that charter schools can be houses of innovation that use a specific mission and vision to get to a stated goal. The second part of the literature review will focus on the selected methodology: portraiture, which like charter schools has supporters and pundits. Although skeptics remain on both topics, this literature review and dissertation confirm the need to continue to pursue research with hopes to add to a body of knowledge that can help increase student achievement in many often marginalized populations.

Charter School History

As of February 2016, there were more than 6,800 charter schools serving nearly 3 million children across the country. The brainstorming and creation of charter schools began not too long ago. In 1974, Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, published a paper in which he envisioned teachers being able to teach without interference from local district bureaucracy. In 1988, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, promoted charter schools as a method to bring this vision to reality. Subsequently, Minnesota

opened the first charter school in 1992. Federal legislation established the Office of Charter Schools Programs (CSP) in 1994 as an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (as cited in Gawlik, 2016). As an educational innovation that is less than 25 years old, there has been significant research and political capital focused on charter schools.

Charter schools have increased in the number of students served and number of schools authorized at an exponential rate. “Since their inception in 1992, the number of charter schools has grown to more than 6,000 in 40 states serving more than 2 million students,” (Booker, Gill, Sass, & Zimmer, 2014, p. 1). However, charter schools still serve a very small slice of the students in public education. The charter school sector is treated as a monolithic set of schools; however, recent studies have indicated that across the U.S. there are distinct charter markets with dramatically different student profiles, governance and oversight structures, and academic quality (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2013). Due to this large and diverse sample, it is often difficult to obtain a true estimate of a charter school’s success on the academic achievement of its student population. This is because many studies on charter school achievement, “take a snap shot of student achievement at one point in time, or compare successive cohorts of students in a given grade,” (Betts & Tang, 2011, p. 3).

Charter Schools in Chicago

Chicago is a microcosm of this growth. “Since these schools opened, parent demand has fueled the growth of additional schools in Chicago. In 1996, the year the charter law was passed, charter public schools served 76 students. Today, that number exceeds 64,000 across the state,” (Kalata & McEwen, 2015, p. 1). Although there is disagreement as to why and how students are leaving their schools in Chicago and how often they are entering charter schools, the authors review this phenomenon in their Winter 2015 briefing saying:

Students across the city [Chicago] are opting out of their zoned schools at record rates. Contrary to claims that charter public schools are driving this trend, parents most often opt out of their zoned schools for other district-run schools.

Accordingly, the claim that charter public schools are “stealing” students from their zoned schools misses the point entirely. Families are making choices every day among a variety of public school options. (p. 1)

There is more research on charter high schools’ performance both nationwide and in Chicago than charter elementary schools. Now, one in five Chicago high school students attends a charter high school in Chicago. Their success is largely not refuted, although there is always discussion of the selection process for student enrollment. Again, Kalata and McEwen discussed this long-standing high school success and stated:

Relative to their demographic peers, Chicago’s charter school students are rising above expectations on multiple measures. This is especially true at the high school level where students generally enter ninth grade significantly behind academically. But something is working in Chicago’s charter high schools that are helping to change the odds and improve opportunities for success for these students. For over a decade, Chicago’s charter high schools have led CPS in achieving the critical milestones of high school graduation and college enrollment. Charter schools’ success on these measures has led to an overall increase in district achievement among students with the highest needs. (p. 9)

The Charter School Debate

Basically, since their inception, there have been multiple debates and concerns over charter schools. These debates span both concern over the quality of education and accountability for performance of the charter schools, but also broad concerns about equity,

which include concerns over equitable distribution of students in certain demographic categories and service of different categorical students, including English language learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities in addition to equity concerns related to school funding.

The quality debate. Although there are a substantial number of studies now available on different metrics of charter school performance, the quality debate can be summarized by a juxtaposition of outcomes reported by CREDO and the work of Caroline Hoxby and her colleagues who have studied the effect of charter schools on student achievement in New York City in addition to some work in Michigan and Arizona, (Hoxby, 2011). CREDO (2009) first found that only 17% of charters had outperformed a similar traditional public school comparison group on a test of matched achievement with the balance either performing about the same (46%) or worse (37%). Since this initial seminal study, CREDO has performed additional studies in 2013 and 2015, which report an increase in charter school student performance.

In the 2015 CREDO report, they stated, “When all of the urban regions are pooled together, urban charter schools on average have significantly greater growth in math and reading than urban TPS [traditional public school]” (p 11). However, charter school critics often use these CREDO studies to make their claim that, “although there does seem to be some improvement in the performance of charters over the last several years, the general claim that all charters outperform traditional public schools is relatively weak,” (Feurstein, 2015, p. 10).

In contrast, Hoxby (2004; 2009), a researcher from Harvard University, has repeatedly studied the effects of charter schools on student achievement and found that charter school students are more likely to be proficient in reading and math on their state exams and the longer charter school students have been in the operation, the more likely they are to have a proficiency advantage over their peers. The author has implemented both a *matching* methodology where she

finds a school with similar racial and socioeconomic composition and location for comparison and, most recently, a lottery-based inclusion method where in New York Hoxby took students who were selected through blind lotteries for attendance to charter schools, and the ones who were not selected in these same lotteries and compared them on a number of dimensions, (Hoxby, 2009).

In addition to Hoxby's multitude of studies, which depict an association between charter school attendance and a closing of the achievement gap, the author completed a study where she directly addressed the findings of the first CREDO study. In 2009, Hoxby wrote a memo, which stated, "The achievement of charter school students is measured with much more error than the achievement of controls, which are not individual students but are group averages of students in traditional public schools" (p. 1).

In addition to these seminal and very popularly referenced studies, there are a plethora of additional studies on charter school quality from state-based reports to national reviews of decades of practice. Among others, these include a significant amount of research done by the National Charter School Research Project. These studies use either experimental (lottery) or student level growth-based methods to infer or demonstrate the causal effect of attending a charter school on student performance. Again, here, a debate ensues as to the appropriate methodology and resulting outcomes of these views into charter school performance over time (Betts & Tang, 2011; Lack, 2009; Wolf, Witte, Dean, & Carlson, 2012).

Equity concerns. In addition to concerns related to charter school performance outcomes, there has been significant focus on the notion that charter schools perform better because they do not represent the actual population of the traditional public schools to which they are being compared. Equity concerns related to the racial segregation of students,

representation of ELLs, students with special needs, and other vulnerable populations continue to cast doubt that charter schools are actually meeting their missions of providing a viable alternative to poorly performing public schools for *all* children.

Fabricant and Fine (2012) conducted a broad review of the research literature on charter schools and said, “Every published study of charter admissions and recruitment document under-enrollment of [ELLs] and students in special education,” (p.38). Those in support of charter school success and innovation often corroborate this. In *Inside Urban Charter Schools*, Merseth (2009) pointed to demographic data for the Boston Public Schools and the five “high performing charter schools she profiled (p. 5). The data affirmed the speculation of many charter school critics that the students in many charter schools do not fully represent the breath of the challenges in the diversity, which exists in the traditional public school counterparts of these charter schools. These are interesting statistics to note especially in the context of this study where the school profiled has an over-representation of these same populations in comparison to its neighborhood schools and the CPS as a whole. In specific terms, as the portrait will later illuminate, Namaste Charter School has almost an identical profile in terms of minority and low-income students but has an over-representation of ELLs and students with disabilities than the CPS as a whole. Table 1 illuminates this point and demonstrates the demographics of CPS and Namaste both at the school’s founding and more recently.

Table 1

Student Demographics for 2004 and 2015

	Chicago Public School		Namaste Charter School	
	2004	2015	2004	2015
Minority	90%	90%	90%	90%
Low-Income	86.87%	80.74%	93%	85%
English Language Learners	12.53%	17.16%	40%	41%
Students with Disabilities	12.02%	13.31%	N/A	17.8%

In addition to the aforementioned equity concerns, a popular argument charging inequity in charter schools is that charter schools “cream” the best students from the worst areas because application to and knowledge of the school are required, thereby not being equitably available to all types of students. In her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravich (2010) discussed the advantages charter schools have over traditional schools:

The regular public schools are at a huge disadvantage in competition with charter schools. It is not only because charter schools may attract the most motivated students, may discharge laggards, and may enforce a tough disciplinary code, but also because the charters often get additional financial resources from their corporate sponsors, enabling them to offer smaller classes, after-school and enrichment activities, and laptop computers for every student. Many charter schools enforce discipline codes that would likely be challenged in court if they were adopted in regular public schools; and because charter schools are schools of choice, they find it easier to avoid, eliminate, or counsel out low-performing and disruptive students. (pp. 136-137)

As one of the most staunchest charter school critics, Ravitch (2010) regularly contends that charter schools are “havens for the motivated,” (p. 145) and as such continues to ensure the downward trajectory of regular public school as they struggle to educate students in the direst circumstances. The author’s contention is that as long as charter schools “cream” the best students out of the traditional public school system, the types of students left in traditional settings are even more difficult to educate, which will eventually lead to a downward trend in their performance over time, especially when compared to the students in charter schools who have a lower proportion of truly needy students and a higher portion of more motivated families and students. However, as evidenced by the Namaste numbers in 2004 and 2015, every charter school cannot so easily be compacted into this mold. Rather, each school needs to be evaluated on its own data of subgroups as it is clear from Ravitch’s commentary that many charter schools may fall into the category of failing to educate equal numbers of marginalized, often under-performing students. For the purposes of this study, this particular equity concern was not applicable as evidenced by the pure numerical data presented.

Overall, the debate on charter school performance, accountability, and equity continues in all research arenas. As previously discussed, through a review of the literature, it is clear that little consensus exists between charter school advocates and opponents as to the performance and equity amongst these schools. Concerns with lower percentages of special education, low-income, and language minority students persist as well as other differences such as the influence of parental choice, which is even more difficult to quantify. As Merseeth (2009) stated, “Passionate arguments for and against charter schooling have created a contentious—and unfortunate—context ... while not ignoring this debate altogether, the authors wish to largely sidestep ideological positions and exchanges” (p. 9). This is precisely one of the reasons for this

investigation: to take an in-depth look at the successes and imperfections of another charter school and use the findings to help all public schools—traditional and charter—continue to improve their academic, socio-emotional and long-term life outcomes for students with particular focus on the most vulnerable ones.

Successful Charter School Practices

In addition to the general history and performance data review of charter schools, now that charters have been around for more than two decades, a research base of successful practices pioneered in charter schools has emerged. Often this research attempts to disengage with the typical debate on charter school ideology and seeks to engage in a “careful analysis of the factors that likely contributes to the outstanding academic performance” (Merseth, 2009, p. 9) of many schools.

Merseth (2009) in the text *Inside Urban Charter Schools*, presented five schools, one by one, and dissecting the organizational elements that make each school a unique education institution and one whose students are prepared to achieve strong standardized test results. The author pointed out not only individual success factors in each school, but also the fact that coherence and operation in a “purposeful and deliberate manner where little is uncertain and structures are designed judiciously to serve these missions,” (p. 228). Merseth highlighted several elements that make these institutions both outstanding schools and high-performing nonprofit organizations including “a clear sense of mission and clear institutional culture, a set of organizational structures and systems that support student learning, using ‘fit’ in hiring, family engagement, and classroom procedures that link to the curricular frameworks” (p. 228).

Gross (2011) identified many elements that lead to overall increased achievement in charter schools, which includes charter schools giving their school leaders new roles as captains

of their own ship so they have room to both rethink the way the school staff and community engage in leadership activities and to develop new partnerships to support the school and hiring differently and crafting new compacts with teachers including one-year agreements indicating a great deal of trust in their school leaders. The author also identified the challenges that still exist in charters to get the most out of these autonomous schools. These challenges include expanded leadership roles for school leaders with limited training and little support from governing boards, schools' reliance on informal structures that makes trust essential, and staff stability in schools serving high-needs students in urban areas. Gross stated, "Convincing others that schools can and maybe should operate differently is yet another challenge" (p. 17). Despite these challenges, looking for promising practices and strategies in high performing schools can be an essential building block on which to continue to improve the nations struggling public schools.

Use of Portraiture in Education Research

It is critical to look at the literature, which has reviewed the portraiture methodology in educational settings, as this is the methodology I have chosen. Although it is often criticized as having serious flaws, including inherent researcher bias due to their presence during all sessions, minimal data analysis and lack of generalizable outcomes. However, portraiture has been gaining credibility as a viable research methodology for stimulating educational change and reform, (Hackmann, 2002).

Some of the aforementioned concerns are evident in other research methods beyond portraiture, and the attention to detail and empathetic artistry evidenced in portraiture juxtapose these concerns as portraiture is not intended to result in the discovery of replicable strategies since the setting and success is so deeply embedded in the resulting successes. First pioneered in 1983 by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot in her text *The Good High School*, Lightfoot used portraiture

to answer the seminal question of what makes a good school. To answer the question, she portrayed three urban, two suburban, and two elite private schools. The text offered a “rare view of human experience in each of these high schools,” (p. 22), where “we find intriguing and important lessons about educational goodness,” (p. 25). Lawrence-Lightfoot’s book was acclaimed receiving the American Educational Research Association Award in 1984 and has been used in other literature to help “fix” schools. As Featherstone (1989) argued:

The *Good High School* reminds us that the creation of a learning community is an essential feature of successful schools. Community, in this context, suggests the power of the local actors on the scene to create conversations and find shared meanings, the significance of the voices of teachers and the crucial importance of local context, as well as the commitment of a scholar to truth and solidarity. (p. 377)

Golstejin and Wright (2013) cited several ways that narrative research and portraiture have been widely used successfully within the social sciences and how portraiture, in particular can, “act as an active catalyst for innovative ideation, informing, shaping and enhancing the subsequent design process,” (p. 313). Thus, according to Hackmann (2002), “portraiture can be a highly successful tool for examining an educational system’s organizational culture, since events frequently can have different meanings for different individuals,” (p. 57).

Through the research presented in this study, interviews and observations undergirded the qualitative nature of portraiture inquiry and representation where I looked for the good and acknowledged the imperfections both in the school as the subject of the research, in the process in the subjective nature of qualitative research, and the potential biases expressed by me as the school’s founder.

More recently, Gaztambide-Fernandez, Cairns, Kawashima, Menna, and VanderDussen (2011) described the ultimate pedagogical potential of portraiture as a research method as it “underscores the deeply self-conscious reflexivity that is central to all qualitative research” (p. 22). The authors use their study to highlight how different kinds of boundaries are negotiated and how each moves through the necessary explorations that are at the heart of qualitative research. The use of the portraiture methodology will also be discussed further in the methodology section of this paper, as it serves as the method of inquiry and representation of the research of effective practices than can be disseminated beyond the walls of the school in the portrait.

Current Political Reality

Since the genesis of this studying 2012, the political reality surrounding education and education reform has changed dramatically and deserves some review and discussion. President Donald Trump has rekindled the once dead issue of choice through vouchers through the nomination and confirmation of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education. DeVos is a long-time advocate of school choice and has individually supported the growth of charter schools in her home state of Michigan. Due to this support, an additional criticism of charter schools, which has been reignited is that charter schools are not held to the same accountability or financial reporting standards as other public schools receiving public funding. Although this is not the case surrounding the portrait highlighted here, as the authorizing school district requires all schools to report out identical metrics and the school system creates their own standardized reporting procedures, it is the case in other places across the country that charter schools must follow the accountability plan in their original contract, which often lags behind when changes are made to traditional public school accountability.

The appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education brings charter schools even further into the discussion of how to improve public education, especially of marginalized populations throughout the country. I anticipate that research studies like this one will encounter even more scrutiny given this increasingly volatile political environment, which is shedding additional light on the concerns highlighted herein related to charter school quality, equity, and overall performance.

Synthesis and Conclusion

The body of literature that currently encompasses research on charter schools, from their academic effectiveness to their controversial elements to the lessons we can learn from individual or groups of schools, is seemingly endless. Here I have described a short history of charter schools, the current debate that still exists when evaluating their quality and equity, and several research studies that have already looked into effective practices, which can be learned from these innovative schools and disseminated to a wider audience. Lastly, a brief review of research related to the portraiture methodology was critical for my ongoing work in preparation for the design of this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Qualitative Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design because of the highly social nature of the questions posed and the context and perspective necessary in searching for patterns of success in a school setting. A qualitative approach was explicitly necessary due to the recognition and analysis of different perspectives, my reflections on the experiences within, and as part of the process and the variety of approaches and methods used throughout the investigation. I used a qualitative research design to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations as I attempted to highlight the reasons for accomplishment rather than defeat in the successful elements of a unique charter school. It provided insights into the possible successes in public schools and helps to develop ideas for potential future research. The goal of the research is not to test what is already known, but rather to help discover and explore to eventually develop new empirically grounded theories. The subjectivity of those being studied and the researcher becomes part of the research process.

Portraiture. As previously reported, Portraiture was pioneered by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot to help document and reflect on the culture of schools, stories of individuals, and the relationship between them. “Portraiture is a method of qualitative research which blurs the line between aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life,” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). It seeks to “combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor,” (p. 3). Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their

voices and their visions—their knowledge and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in a social and cultural context, and the give and take of the researcher and the subject is critical to the success and authenticity of the resulting portrait. In this way, art and science work together with each participant as a picture emerges amongst the stories told.

There has been agreement among researchers about the need for continuing to investigate inside schools and classrooms (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). While social science portraiture is the method of inquiry and representation for this study, generalizations beyond the success of this charter school is beyond the scope of the qualitative data presented. I believe that many important aspects of this school can inform anyone interested in improving the condition of public schools across the country, especially those who serve a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged students.

Data Gathering Techniques

Portraiture is a type of “case study” analysis as described by Baxter and Jack (2008). Each data source is one piece of the “puzzle,” with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon. Although I utilized quantitative results of student achievement, the results were interpreted, judged, and analyzed through interviews with the charter school staff. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews formed the basis of my data collection.

The process involved interviewing founding teachers, parents, and students in addition to observing those constituencies inside the school as necessary. As is typical in portraiture, I will pay close attention to the context and not only listen to stories, but also listen *for* a story, thereby weaving together the stories of each participant to create the overall portrait of the school and its successes. Therefore, basic findings, interpretation, and judgment are woven together as the

portrait of the school unfolded through ongoing interviews and observations into the school. Although my role as founder provides a unique lens as a researcher, my voice will be highly guided and focused on the empirical data collected from program observations and interview participants.

Although not intended necessarily as a part of portraiture, I used the portrait to make some recommendations; however, these recommendations are as contributions to the field not necessarily as recommendations, which imply attribution. These recommendations come in the form of leadership lessons, which could apply to charter and other private and public school leaders alike in the creation of high performing, high functioning collaborative teams to enable high student achievement, especially when educating an often marginalized population.

The process of creating narrative portraits requires a difficult, sometimes paradoxical vigilance to empirical description, aesthetic expression, careful scrutiny, and modulation of voice. It is a discerning, deliberative process and a highly creative one. The data must be examined carefully, searching for the story line that emerges from the material. However, there is never a single story; many could be told. Thus, I was active in selecting the themes used to tell the story, strategic in deciding on points of focus and emphasis, and creative in defining the sequence and rhythm of the narrative.

What is left out is often as important as what gets included—all of the actions, interactions, and reflections that also shape the form of the story. As I collected data through the interview and observation process, I was careful to note the environment and emotion present. There is a crucial dynamic between documenting and creating the narrative, between receiving and shaping, reflecting and imposing, and mirroring and improvising. The effort to reach coherence had to flow organically from the data and from the interpretation of the writer (me).

The observation protocols and interview questions are listed in Appendix B and Appendix C. They were used during the data collection process. These questions served to ensure continuity across the constituencies and interviews, but I had the discretion to follow the interviewees as conversations unfolded. I then transcribed and coded the interviews looking for themes that create the school's portrait and provide evidence of the themes emerging that encompass the school's ethos, success, and design.

An additional important source of information will be in-school observations, which will be structured and conducted after the interview process. These observational field notes, although following a protocol, provided "thick description" as describe by Geertz (1973), and originally coined by Ryle. "Thick" description was used, which in Geertz's words involves ascribing intentionality to one's behavior. Geertz (1973) said:

From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description." (p. 6)

In this case, as Geertz described that in order to be credible, I had to use "thick description" to help provide a context for these observations and to help bring intentionality and life into the elements within the context of this study.

Portrait Context

To help set the stage for the portrait and methodology of portraiture, I provided the charter school's demographic and physical context within the city of Chicago and the CPS. As the "thick description" described was used to create a full picture of the school, this context

helped to fully develop this setting so that the reader can see, feel, and touch every image and feeling described herein.

School location. Namaste Charter School's location is on the near southwest side of Chicago, which enabled the school to both recruit students from a short distance and ensure a diverse population of students throughout the school's existence. The school is located in McKinley Park, a neighborhood of mixed ethnicities and residents of various socioeconomic statuses. One mile west of the school is Bridgeport, a mostly White, middle class neighborhood famous for being the home of the Daley family who ruled Chicago for so many years. Over the last 20 years, most of the Catholic schools, which housed thousands of students in earlier decades, have closed with only a few remaining. The threat of continued consolidation in the neighborhood has accelerated many families' search for other school options.

Just east of Bridgeport is Bronzeville, a historically African American neighborhood with a decreasing school-based population and many old school buildings. One mile south of the school is New City, otherwise known in Chicago as "Back of the Yards," a highly Hispanic and gang ridden neighborhood with extensive issues of violence that plagues the neighborhood and affects students' existence and experience. Overcrowded neighborhood schools with often poor performance, lack of effective language-based programming, and a lack of afterschool opportunities for students also plagues the neighborhood and forces parents to search for options that can accommodate extensive work schedules as well as their desire for their children to attain more than themselves.

One mile west of the school is Brighton Park, a highly Hispanic community with severely overcrowded schools forcing class sizes to soar. One mile north of the school is Chinatown, a

bustling neighborhood with many new immigrants searching for enriched academic experiences for their students.

Demographics. The location of the school drives the demographics mostly because of the range of school-age students who attend the school are 5 to 14 years old, which means that parents are the primary mode of transportation for students to and from the school. The resulting school population has ranged from 80-88% Hispanic, 10-5% African American, and 5% other, and has remained stable at about 10% White through the 14 years of the school's existence.

While the predominance of students are students of need, the free and reduced price lunch eligibility of students has steadily declined from about 94% in 2004 to just over 84% in 2016. While this decline is significant, the demographic shifts have not had a major effect on the school's operations.

Language programming. Due to the highly Hispanic demographic, the resulting incoming class to Namaste in its first year of operation had many students for whom English was a second language and Spanish was a first language. Therefore, in its inception, the school was legally obligated to create a program for ELL students. For a variety of reasons, a dual language model was chosen to service these students to equally validate and develop both the Spanish and English language in as many students as possible. Throughout the observations and interviews, many times both Spanish and English are used for communication, as the bilingual nature of the school permeates its being.

Sampling

To hold true to the research requirements and my desire to build a story that highlights the good, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) to identify participants from each of three constituencies involved in the founding years at Namaste: teachers, parents, and students. Four

Namaste Alumni were interviewed from the founding classes of the school. These were students who spent at least 5 years at Namaste, graduated from the school in eighth grade, and have since continued on in their educational journeys in a variety of venues. By the time of interview, each participant had reached the age of 18. To compliment these student long-term perspectives, I also interviewed a founding staff member and a founding parent.

Through interviews with six participants, I searched for consistency in thought, feeling, and experience to create an understanding of the unique aspects the school combined to create differentiated positive outcomes. As a concluding perspective, I also interviewed the school's current leader – the Executive Director. Her experiences, insights, and reflections as a newcomer to the school in her first six months of work were critical to connecting the leadership lessons that emerged.

Alumni students. Four alumni students were interviewed to help create the foundation for the portrait in addition to the observational walk-through and protocol used. V.R. is a Namaste alumnus who graduated from the school in 2012 after spending five years as a student. A Latino male, he transferred from a traditional elementary school in fourth grade so could easily reflect on the different learning environments, teachers, expectations, and work presented in each environment. Following Namaste, V.R. went onto a selective enrollment high school for 4 years and just completed his first year at Taylor University in Indiana where he is studying political science and theology.

R.F. is a Latino male student who lives in the neighborhood surrounding the school. He graduated from Namaste in 2013 after spending 9 years as a student. Entering in kindergarten, R.F. did not speak any Spanish but was enrolled in the dual language program. After graduating from Namaste, he went to a private high school in Chicago, recently completed his high school

studies in 4 years, and received a scholarship to attend the University of Illinois-Champaign in the engineering program. R.F. has two male siblings who are currently attending Namaste.

D.F. is a male African American student who graduated from Namaste in 2012 after 8 years of attendance. He was in the founding first grade monolingual class and also comes from the neighborhood in which Namaste is located. D.F. graduated from Namaste and attended a local I.B. program in a neighborhood high school on the north side of the city. After graduating in 4 years from high school, he went to Carthage College in Kenosha, WI. He has had some recent setbacks and decided to transfer to a college closer to home while working full time as a supervisor at U.P.S. He will be attending Moraine Valley majoring in criminal justice this fall.

A.W. was the last student interviewed. A Latino male, he transferred to Namaste after attending a traditional elementary school through second grade. He attended Namaste for 6 years and then went on to enter a dual degree program at a selective enrollment high school, which offered a combined diploma with DeVry University in 4 years. He completed his studies in high school, graduated with an Associate's Degree, and entered Northeastern Illinois University as a freshman last fall.

Parents. When students entered Namaste in 2004, their parents chose the school for them after being accepted in the blind lottery they entered at age 6 or 7. Uncovering the reasons for enrollment and subsequent re-enrollment year after year in this alternative educational environment was crucial to creating a well-rounded portrait of the school.

J.T. is a parent from Namaste's first kindergarten class. His son graduated from Namaste in 2013 after 9 years of education at the school. As a neighborhood and community resident, J.T. encountered Namaste recruiting parents in his neighborhood library. J.T. is a Hispanic male whose family consists of himself, a wife, a daughter who attended a Catholic school, and his son,

who was scheduled to attend the neighborhood elementary school until he was chosen from the lottery to attend Namaste. He has continued to support Namaste in the 4 years since his son's graduation.

Staff. As numerous studies report, the number one factor in increasing student achievement is the teacher. Therefore, completing the portrait, I have woven in the reflections of founding staff members who began with the school in its first year of inception, 2004. R.A. is currently the Business Manager, but she began at Namaste as a Teacher Assistant and has held a variety of positions in the classroom and operational departments of the school. A Hispanic woman and community resident, her perspective provides yet another glimpse into the more than decade long school success.

Completing the portrait will be an interview with the current school leader. N.N. has been in place for about six months now following two interim principals who succeeded me as the founding leader of the school after a period of 11 years. N.N. is a Latina woman who was sought out as the next leader of Namaste through a long-term search led by the Namaste Board of Directors in conjunction with an outside search firm. A transformational leader herself, N.N. pledged to not only continue to lead Namaste as the successful, innovative place that it currently is, but to help continue to grow and develop the policies and practices inside the institution, which makes the school successful. Her perspective as a fresh face leading the school into its adolescent years helped to round out the portrait and solidify some of the leadership lessons, especially given some of the more recent turmoil the school has endured.

Data Analysis

As previously described, data analysis began with transcribing and coding the information obtained in interviews about the school's organization and practice. Practices related to the school's success encompassed the primary codes used. As Maxwell (2005) described, I fractured the data by categorizing and coding it. This allowed me to focus and place attention on details by probing into very small segments at a time and keeping focus on one data set at a time. I then balanced different disciplinary orientations as required by the portraiture methodology and weaved together the art and the science.

In addition to the observed and interpreted data, I also combined non-scientific factors—the three “I’s” described by Creswell (1998), “insight, intuition, and impression” (p. 142). Triangulating the data with use of the interview transcripts, school observational notes and checklists, additional resources such as school data profiles and performance reports will be critical to the authentic representation of the portrait of Namaste Charter School. Lastly, the voice of the observer, also the school's founder, was critical in painting the picture of the school's trajectory over time.

Authenticity

Ethical considerations. Since the nature of my project is the creation of a portrait, the standard “do no harm” provision of ethical consideration during research is not wholly applicable. However, ethical considerations are certainly present both due to the personal nature of the project and the bias by which the researcher approaches the situation. “Bias is created by influences that distort the results of a research study,” (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008, p. 29). Using Namaste to build the portrait comes with the application of a certain amount of bias because the founder of the school is also the primary researcher. However, with the formation of

an ethical plan for the project, including guidelines for interviews of students, staff, and families was critical to ensure that ethical considerations did not taint the research process. Transparency around the potential bias along with a clearly delineated purpose statement and process helped to proactively address these potential concerns.

The narrative focused interviews enabled me to listen to the stories through a positivist approach, which allowed for the setting aside of the traditional focus on validity, reliability, and generalizability and instead focused on authenticity through finding the general through a description of the particular. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) stated, “The portraitist is interested not only in producing complex, subtle description in context, but also in searching for the central story, developing a convincing and authentic narrative” (p. 12). They continued, “The portraitist’s standard, then, is one of authenticity, capturing the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context,” (p. 12). What emerged was the portrait of a successful, independent charter school with some clear tenants from which others can learn and increase the effectiveness of their schools. “Not only is the portraitist interested in developing a narrative that is both convincing and authentic, she is also interested in recording the subtle details of the human experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14).

My role as the school’s founder, but having distanced myself now for a few years, helped to serve as a reflection tool. I conducted this study not only to create a portrait of the school’s overall success, but also as I attempted to gather leadership lessons that could inform the school’s continuing growth and development and to be transferable in the growth and development of other school communities. As Lawrence-Lightfoot described through a reflection on an artist’s (Maxine’s) reflection on a drawing, “The personal context of the artist, rich with

the resources that expertise will provide, allows Maxine to distance herself from the emotion and give it new internal context in an unexpected vehicle,” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 75). As the creator of the school, I attempted to look back from a distance juxtaposing this vision to my up-close, intense personal memories and experiences to create a tool for better understanding various elements that determine a new school’s success or failure.

Lawrence-Lightfoot provided the potential effect of portraiture best in her text, *The Good High School* (1983) by writing:

Portraits are not static documents or elusive texts that are directed towards a small circle of academic colleagues. They directly touch the actors in the portrait and may speak more broadly to a diverse range of people concerned about the issues and ideas expressed in the piece ... this textured form may serve as a catalyst for change within an institution. It may become an organizational text that invites response and criticism from its inhabitants. The external, wide-angle view of the portraitist may contrast sharply with the various perspectives of insiders. But the dissonant strains provide opportunities for examining the power of roles, perspectives, and values in school life. Used in this way, social science portraiture may play a critical role in shaping educational practice and inspiring organizational change. (p. 24)

The ultimate hope is that both the community at Namaste and the outside community of charter school supporters and those who critical oppose them will use this portrait as a tool for self-criticism, reflection, and conscience change.

CHAPTER FOUR

Namaste Charter School

As I drive up to the school, abandoned buildings, shuttered businesses, and graffiti surround me. Mothers are walking strollers and people of all ages, races, and ethnicities wait for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) bus at a worn down bench. I turn right off of 35th Street onto Paulina Avenue and slow down abruptly. What appear to be new speed bumps in the road greet me about every 500 feet. Many businesses are closed or abandoned, but there are clear signs of life and love in this neighborhood. Neighbors sit on their front stoops, smile, and wave: their homes are well kept, and there are many advertisements for community events as I drive down the main roads of the neighborhood.

Despite the growing and continuing violence on the south side of Chicago, these community members create hope within the plight—they are happy, helpful, and welcoming. I remember the same feeling of hope when over 14 years ago I had the idea to start a charter school. My team and I looked everywhere throughout the city for appropriate school related buildings along with the challenge of finding a community that both needed a good school option and welcomed it from an outsider. When we found our original site (the school has since grown once, moved once, and built an addition), as the founder, I began attending community meetings including the civic association and the community-policing meeting. Every time, despite the clear despair in the physical surroundings of the community left in the shadows of Chicago's former stockyards, I felt inspired by the people, the feelings, and the hope that people expressed and clearly possessed. As I drive down the same roads I did over 14 years ago, the same inspiration and hope enters my mind, I wonder how the school has changed, grown, and developed over the last few years since my departure.

On the left side of the street is a large, brick building. It is imposing, one of the tallest on the street. As I turn into the driveway between the school and the church rectory, I notice the newer entrance to the school with columns and large glass windows. Next to the school is a rectory, and next to the rectory is a large, old ornate church. I park my car in the parking lot, which is oddly empty. I pull back out onto the street to find a space to park due to the juxtaposition of the bustling school in front of me with the vacant lot. Maybe there is a reason there are no cars in the lot. I remember in my time at Namaste we used the parking lot for student recess, ongoing play, and physical education. Perhaps this practice is still present in the fabric of the school community.

I find a parking space next to the church. There are deep, long puddles that line the street due to recent rains. I remember the extensive flooding we endured when we first rented this “new” building, as the school’s first home did not have a basement. My mind quickly recalls the flood of 2010 when heavy rains forced the city sewers to back up into the basement at Namaste just as new families were arriving in the evening for orientation. As the water rushed in through the drains in the floor in the kitchen, teachers attempted to sandbag and prevent the water from entering areas that were recently carpeted with new, light gray carpet.

Although that was a lost cause, the community came together in an incredibly uniting experience of lining up the stairs and filling buckets of water, passing them down a line of Namaste teachers and staff and draining the basement of the water and sewage that had entered unexpectedly and unwelcomed. School was to start only 5 days later, despite the incredibly late nights and long days of rebuilding. Smiling, I wonder how many others present at the school today remember those days, which seem so long in the past, and what words will represent the

community spirit I will observe today. It will be strange to be only an observer this time, rather than the founder and school leader of the past.

As I exit my car, I feel the warm breeze of summer time weather and smell the starkly strong scent of the bouillon factory I passed on Ashland Avenue while on my way to the school. The smell is not inviting; I long to be back in my car even though it smells like the cheesy popcorn my children were eating on the way home last night.

I first walk by the church. I see a plaque on the wall that reads, "Peter and Paul, 1871." The church is tall, ornate, and run-down. The doors are open and a morning mass is occurring. There are maybe 15 people there, mostly senior citizens hunched over at the pews. I remember in my early morning arrivals to school as the school leader walking down the path and greeting these friendly, mostly ancient parishioners as they headed off to the 6 a.m. mass.

As I walk up to the school's entrance, I see a friendly, Hispanic woman buzz me into the glass doorway. Her eyes alone are welcoming and bright, a sign of what is to come, I hope. A bright orange wall with a three dimensional piece of student-created art greets me. It is abstract, with bright colors and warm tones matching the warmth of summer weather outside. I am glad to be inside again, with the fresh scent of a new school day in front of me. On my left, I notice a stark, black decal on the glistening white wall. I think, "Namaste, the light in me sees the light in you."

I check in and am given a bright orange visitors pass. As I reflect on my past entrances to Namaste, this one stands in stark opposition to the others. As the founder and school leader, I often entered the school when no one else was there. I would enter with a key and quickly run down the half flight of stairs to the alarm pad at the bottom of the stairs. Once disarmed, the school, and especially my quiet and serene office, awaited me. I'd often spend at least one, but usually two uninterrupted hours completing paperwork, planning meetings and professional

development, responding to emails, or reviewing grants before other staff entering the building. Those mornings were the most productive times for me, I would escape my house before anyone awoke and enter the school building most days before the sun rose.

During my tenure at Namaste, I was a fixture at the school and in the community. Everyone would address me by name. However, today, I sign in as a visitor in my own former home by a receptionist whom I have never met, but exudes the same warm and friendly aura that I recall from the past.

Since I am conducting observations, the secretary calls a teacher to take me to the “old front door” where children will begin entering shortly. As we exit the lobby doors, the overwhelming smell distracts me again, but a line of cars awaiting us to open the “old front door” soon amazes me. Another teacher is standing there, and when the atomic clock displayed next to the door strikes 7:45 am exactly, she chains the door open and greets each student who arrives by name. “Buenos días and Good Morning!” she says. This friendly, warm beginning to the day reminds me of many of the reflections that Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot made in *The Good High School* when she entered different educational environments that were determined to be high functioning. “The easy rapport between students and teachers is immediately apparent in public settings,” (p. 343).

I see what she means immediately. Students file in an orderly manner grabbing the handrail to go down the half flight of stairs into the school’s “garden level.” I think back to my time, all 11 years as the school leader and founder, where I relished this opportunity to connect with students, teachers, and parents alike. I spent at least two mornings a week at that front door through rain, sleet, snow, and sunshine. The opportunity to wave to a parent on their way to the

office and remind them that their child was in good, loving hands for the next 8-10 hours filled my soul, and set them off to conquer their days with a sense of calmness and joy.

Seeing alumni from Namaste walk their younger siblings to school before catching the bus to high school would remind me of the tireless work of the past and reignite my passion for the work of the present. These students would be jovial and joking, often connecting to their former relationship with me as the principal of the school, now as an alumnus. It was an opportunity for reflection and for growing and planning the next step in the journey. This day is different for me. Although I recognized many students, there is so many whose names I do not know, for they must have enrolled after my tenure ended. It feels strange to see their Namaste shirts and not have an intimate knowledge of the students surrounding me.

Students of all ages are smiling, many donning Namaste tee shirts, and immediately turning into the kitchen to grab bright red trays. The trays are filed through a short, bright red salad bar filled with yogurt, cottage cheese, cut up fruit, and granola. Students create a mish-mosh of food, most grab a milk and walk out of the kitchen into the next door, which is a large cafeteria. Every student is dressed in a smile. Even when the mouths of students are not smiling, I can see a glimmer in their eyes that represents excitement, happiness, and joy. This joy reminds me of the same emotions that existed when the school first opened its doors, almost 14 years ago.

The students sit at traditional cafeteria tables, those with the brown benches attached to long rectangular tables. They speak Spanish and English interchangeably, expressing a similar value for both languages. Unlike any other cafeteria I have ever been in, napkins and cups are in the middle of the table along with extra utensils, and there is an exciting buzz in the room. I notice students lining up on three sides of the cafeteria as they finish eating and talking with their neighbors in line. Teachers circle the cafeteria to help students open milk, peel oranges, and

clean up spills. Soft, but upbeat music plays in the background. Some students mouth the words to songs while others sway to the beat. Although the cafeteria is aged and worn, bright colors adorn the walls and the windowsills amid the consistent references to the “Rainbow Café.” We are in the Rainbow Café.

A teacher comes to lead a line of students out the door. I am curious to see where they are going, so I follow along. We venture up the stairs. A small sign is at the bottom of the stairs, which reads, “Take the stairs. Going up to the top burns 25 calories and saves electricity from elevator use. Help preserve your own body, and Namaste’s.” This sign is a new interpretation of the original mission, which our founding board developed to combine academic rigor with instruction in health and wellness in a peaceful environment: to build whole children. Despite some initial trepidation, I cannot wait to see what else has been preserved, but also what has been re-envisioned, interpreted, grown, and changed.

We end up in the large gymnasium, a volleyball net is set up on one side, and students are jumping rope and playing foursquare on the other. The ceilings are tall and the walls are stark white with a few decal statements presented on them. On one wall I read, “Take care of your body. It is the only home you have to live in.” Another boasts, “A gym is a place where physical education occurs.” Student backpacks line the walls, and students are actively engaged in all different activities. The teacher who escorted us up the three flights of stairs leaves the gymnasium but there are three other teachers supervising the students.

Every staff members is smiling, looking students in their eyes, and speaking in a soft, regulated pace. When I started Namaste, I was not used to this type of interaction before the school day beginning, but we were determined to create a different place and a new way of greeting students and reminding them that today was the day they would do something amazing.

Teacher/Student Relationships

The official school day has not yet begun, and it is clear that the relationships between teachers and students throughout the school are deep, meaningful, and credible. Since learning is contextualized in situations that students encounter with teachers, the relationships that permeate the school are critical to overall student success. As I scan the gymnasium, which by now at 8:15 a.m. houses more than 100 students, each teacher supervisor is actively engaged with students. This is not a typical observation at 8:15 a.m. before “official” teacher hours begin. As a principal in a traditional suburban school now, this feeling is not simply speculation, but based on my experiences before founding Namaste and now leading another school in a different context.

In the more “traditional” environments, I witness the daily student sprint to the classroom to beat the bell, stressed out parents running their children to the doors before work, and students with yawns and messy hair arriving at class ready to learn or not. At Namaste, the focus is on the little interactions, those that build relationships over time, especially to set students up for success before the school day begins. I can see that this critical lever implemented so many years ago is still a valued and treasured part of the Namaste community.

I witness one teacher in the corner calling one student out of the game of four square and chatting in the corner. The student willingly came over to the teacher, and I notice the first words that come out of the teacher’s mouth, “Diego, do you need a minute to breathe and calm down before we chat?” The student motions to the teacher and does a “count down” with his hand from five to one, then looks up at the teacher and says, “I’m ready.” I cannot hear the entire conversation, as I am across the gymnasium, but their non-verbal cues suggest that this interaction has happened before and will likely happen again in some context. It is not a feared interaction. The conversation ends with a high five and the student returns to the game. “The

essence of positive relationships is the student seeing the warmth, feeling the encouragement and the teacher's high expectations, and knowing that the teacher understands him or her," (Hattie, 2009, p. 158).

The clear focus on teacher/student relationships has been present since the inception of Namaste. For almost two weeks before students joining the school community, each summer the Namaste staff reflect on what went well and what could be improved from the previous year. They think about themselves, their actions, and their emotions. I reflected with them. The glimmer of hope that I encountered from the simple drive in was blown into full reality inside the walls of the school. The laughter, happiness, and hope are contagious, spilling up and down the stairs, in and out of the doors, and throughout the interactions around the building.

When I began at Namaste more than 14 years ago, the notion of teacher/student relationships was just a notion. We wanted to do something different. Teachers were the cornerstones of effective schools that we had seen or been a part of in our prior experience, but it was not commonplace to have such a focus on creating these positive and productive teacher/student relationships as a fundamental school initiative. My personal goal at that time was to ensure that I did whatever it took to make sure that there was nowhere in the world teachers would rather teach than at Namaste. The challenges would be great, but the support would be even greater. As we interviewed those first teachers, we focused on hiring ones who put relationships first. "Good schools are ultimately dependent on good teachers—smart and inspired people, people who have something to teach" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 341).

Alumni point to their deep and enduring relationships with teachers as one of the most defining factors of their time at Namaste. A.W. said:

I remember during eighth grade, I was struggling with math. That was one thing I really did not understand, and I would always go with Mr. S, who was my Algebra teacher, back then. He was the one I really sort of bond with the most because of the fact that he helped me a lot trying to get through the sort of pre-algebra state before I go into high school. (p. 5).

Each alum pointed to their teachers at Namaste and remembered something special about each of them. Inspired and smart people that is for sure, but also individuals who left and continue to leave an indelible mark on the lives of young men and women.

Teacher credibility. In his books, *Visible Learning* (2009), *Visible Learning for Teachers* (2012), and *Visible Learning for Literacy* (2016), John Hattie conducted a meta-analysis of over 800 works, which included over 250 million students. In his synthesis, he provided strong evidence for the effect sizes or magnitude of particular strategies, curricula, and school practices that promote student achievement. At the top end of the list, with an effect size of 0.90, is teacher credibility. Students know which teachers can make a difference in their lives. Teacher credibility is a constellation of characteristics, including trust, competence, dynamism, and immediacy. Students evaluate each of these factors to determine if their teacher is credible and if they are going to choose to learn from that teacher (Fisher, Frey & Hattie, 2016, p. 12). This short interaction observed between a student and a teacher even before the bell rings is evidence that the student feels credibility in the teacher.

The sentiment of teacher credibility at Namaste is echoed in many other observations, including in a dual language social studies class observed later in the afternoon. The students are having a discussion about the book *Red Scarf Girl* and the main character's experiences in communist China during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. One student compares some of Ji-

li's (the main character in the book) experiences and feelings to some things he has been feeling since the election of Donald Trump. "Being sanctioned for believing something, or being something isn't totally foreign to us these days," the student stated. The deep engaged and raw discussion that follows was a clear indication that students feel safe to express their feelings, take risks, and know that the teacher will listen, push, and question them to make connections in and around their learning. As Hattie (2012) noted, these are the elements that define credibility, and this naked, raw expression is a reflection that the students are learning from this teacher.

The credibility of every member of the staff at Namaste is corroborated by alumni students who reflect on their time at Namaste not only with fond memories of events and friends, but also of exceptionally strong bonds with teachers. A.W. talked about his learning at Namaste through what he learned from one particular teacher he had in both fourth and fifth grade. He stated:

He was actually the teacher that sort of helped me find my love for reading. And that's one of the things that here at Namaste was one of the things that I loved to do was read, because I could just get lost in books for days on end. And that's one thing I do believe was a key component to my, to my journey at Namaste, was reading. One for the library upstairs, two for just the literature that we read in class too, was phenomenal. Like I remember it was fifth grade, I had already finished Ender's Game. Like and that book takes a hot minute to read. I'm not even going to lie. And that took me, it did take me almost the entire year, but it was a fantastic story and that really after reading that, I sort of found the passion for ready and that's how really Namaste helped me grow, is in that one, not necessarily that one subject. I did find love in other subjects as well, but that was really the pushing point for me throughout the rest of my time here. (p. 9)

Almost every student I spoke with mentioned a specific teacher who changed his or her trajectory in some way. R.F. described what he remembers about first coming to Namaste as a 5-year old with the recollection of a teacher. He exclaimed:

You know those are all the guys that I grew up with, but I mean Miss *Garza* has always had a special place in my heart because, you know, without her, you know, she was the, she was the reason why I kinda stuck with, you know, 'cause Spanish was something new to me. (p. 2)

D.F., another founding student, compared Namaste to other schools he attended before and after his 8 years at Namaste. He responded:

I mean, it's, it's very like, I will say like, you guys care a lot. When I was there, you know, even though I get in trouble a lot, like you guys you know, cared about me and you guys still you know, like to this day probably my high school doesn't like contact me and see how I'm doing, but you do. (p. 2)

As the founder of the school, I focused not on teacher experience, but on teacher credibility (although this technical term did not quite exist yet). In our first years of operation, we found teachers deeply committed to developing long-standing, trusting relationships with families, but also had a substantial amount of enthusiasm, drive, ambition, and determination. They believed, as Hattie found through his research, that “the number one factor affecting student achievement is the teacher” (Hattie, 2009, p. 8). They took this responsibility “by the horns” and held themselves accountable for their win and their students’ ongoing learning, growth, and development as students and as people.

Despite some recent turmoil at the school, it is clear that these tenants are still being employed in the hiring process. Since I departed as the school’s leader 2 years ago, the school

has endured some challenges in transition. There have been three school leaders in these last two school years. Namaste's current school leader has been present for only 2 weeks during my period of observation, but her passion and commitment to the mission, vision, and values of the school are obvious. As she experiences attrition in staff, she will reiterate the need that teachers focus on their practice of being student-centered, particularly on building strong relationships centered in being credible to students. "The essence of the student-centered teacher is fourfold: a student-centered teacher has warmth, trust, empathy, and positive relationships" (Hattie, 2012, p. 157). As N.N. added:

So I mean there are a ton of strengths. I think the school, community, the students ... I think are the most powerful strengths and example of what can happen when we empower students to have agency when we ... you know ... one of the things that I'm, I'm always super impressed when I talk to students and listen how they advocate for themselves and listening to how they talk about their feelings and like what they need from their teachers, and they are confident and comfortable to do that with their teachers.

(p. 4)

School Culture

As I continue to scan the room, music begins playing in the background. I notice students scamper into a circle, leaving an oval shape opening in the middle. Students begin to help others around them realize that music has started to play and turn towards the middle. A teacher walks into the center and begins to take large breaths with both his lungs and his hands reaching from his hips overhead. I notice the students begin to follow his actions, even with no verbal prompting at all. Students take note and follow what they observe from others.

Every school has a distinctive culture, where “culture” refers to the beliefs, assumptions, and habits of those who inhabit the organization. As Merseth (2009) stated, “Culture influences everything in an organization ... culture is the marinade, the soup in which operational elements such as the people, the structures, and the system operate and in which instruction, an important task of these schools, floats” (p. 123). Culture is a creation by a group of people, in this case, the founding staff and leadership of Namaste, which contains and expresses the total of shared values, beliefs, symbols, attitudes, and standards for activity and communication that have been transmitted, learned and internalized within the school setting over the past 14 years. D.F. said:

As a socially designed construct, there is something amorphous about culture. It is hard to define, to describe, and to narrate. But it surrounds us all the time. Definitions may be sub-standard or not descriptive, but culture comes alive in concrete descriptions of events, social inter- actions, and classroom behaviors. (p. 1)

D.F. then described his first recollection of coming to Namaste as “it was, it was just, you know, peaceful. And I made a lot of good friends that day, you know, just being around kids” (p. 2).

The cultural environment, both physical and socio-emotional comes through right when you enter the doors and are greeted with a smile and a “buenos días,” and throughout the hallways with ongoing smiles and laughter permeating the school. This is not done in a distracting or nonchalant way; however, but joy and purpose characterize the non-verbal interactions occurring almost every second throughout the school day. There are no lines for students to stand on; there are no fingers over teachers’ mouths signaling the “quiet zone.” Students self-regulate, find enough space to conduct their business, discussions, and interactions, but do not follow rules in a militaristic fashion as sometimes characterized in other high-achieving charter schools at times. These students seem to know the limit of their “freedom,”

sometimes needing to be reminded by a teacher but often this occurs in a non verbal fashion with simply a look. Students are expected to conduct themselves with honor and respect for themselves and others, and it is clear that caring not only for themselves, but also for others and for their space is something they practice regularly.

While walking through the halls, I frequently am stopped by students ensuring I know where I am going as they see my bright orange visitor sticker, that I know what I am doing and how to get help if I need. As J.T., a founding parent describes, “It’s something that you guys [create] with Namaste, like a real community,” said J.T. (p. 5). The words “community” and “family” come up over and over again in multiple contexts. R.F. explained:

I like how, I like how it’s, it’s kinda small, like very family-oriented, and I really like that. Like that’s one of the first words that will pop-up when I hear Namaste is family, because we’re just really small, but like we were caring and reach out to the community and encourage others to follow the same livelihood that we live here, you know. So, I mean, yeah, that’s one thing for sure ... you know, you’re not just another student just walking through the halls, you know. People actually care for you. I like that, that careness. (p. 3)

As I walk up the stairway corridor, I notice large words in Spanish and English above the door frames at each floor. At the first floor landing I read, “Peaceful School Culture, Ambiente Pacifica.” The feeling of family, of culture, of community is embodied in these words, “Peaceful School Culture.” Alone, these are just words, but at Namaste, you can feel these words come alive regularly. Students are focused and learning but laughing and interacting. It is peaceful. It certainly is the school’s culture.

During the founding years of Namaste, we had plenty of discussion and debate over what eventually became the school's six pillars. There were so many things that made the school unique we had to ask ourselves the question, "If these specific people are not here, what are the most important things that define Namaste that we would not want those things to change?" Some staff were focused on the school garden, others brought up Friday Family Breakfast and others brought up yoga.

In creating these six pillars, we had to broaden our lenses and focus on themes rather than activities that would be the cornerstone of the developing school. In this way, students and teachers would have continuity even when founding personnel left, due to a defined set of driving values, or commitments. These became the pillars, the foundation of what would create and define the school's culture over time, regardless of who was at the helm, or worked in the trenches. These pillars were intentionally written to drive the work and interactions of all of the school's constituents: parents, families, students, parents, staff, and community:

- The *balanced learning pillar* aims to create a learning environment that values all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy across the curriculum for our community.
- The *language and culture pillar* aims to create a learning environment that increases knowledge, respect, and appreciation for the languages and cultures of the world for our community.
- The *collaborative practice* pillar aims to create a learning environment that maximizes partnership amongst our community.
- The *nutrition, health, and wellness pillar* aims to create a learning environment that cultivates exercise, eating right, and taking care of mind as components of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for our community.

- The *peaceful school culture pillar* aims to create a learning environment that promotes safety, respect, open dialogue, and nonviolent conflict resolution for our community.
- The *movement pillar* aims to create a learning environment that incorporates movement into academic instruction to stimulate an alert and active body and mind for our community.

As I look around as an observer now, I realize that much has changed; however, the true heart and soul of the school remain the same as it was more than 14 years ago. As V.R. said:

There is definitely a difference when you come to Namaste, there's something different about Namaste itself compared to like schools in general ... there is a really strong sense of community and a really strong sense of family here at Namaste. (p. 5)

After my tenure of more than 11 years as the school leader ended, there have been three different leaders at the helm of Namaste in less than 3 years. The pillars that were solidified in the first few years have helped the school continue its vision and mission in an actionable way despite continual transition at the top. You can see these pillars visually represented around the school, and although the current school leader acknowledges that we need to “get back to the core,” she has indicated that these pillars are what drive the school’s work, and that with all of the leadership transition, there has been some “swaying” from these core values. However, this acknowledgement reaffirms that the development of these pillars would be a critical element to the school’s ongoing differentiation and success over time.

When asked about building on the culture existing at Namaste, N.N.’s response was clearly indicative of the challenge that she faces in resurrecting what was observed even just the year before. She replied:

I think it's interesting because I've been able to experience, I feel like, not the fullness of what the culture and experience was at a particular time in Namaste's history. I think with recent transitions, you know, with the transition over the last few years, like some of the traditions that were started with Namaste still exist, but I don't know that they are as powerful as they were when the original people's ideas these were ... were implementing them ... so, you know, there is also like a re-norming on what it means to uphold the values that I think were foundational to Namaste that needs to occur. (p. 2)

The famed text, *Shaping School Culture, The Heart of Leadership* by Deal and Peterson (1999) reinforces this notion by considering some famed business examples, which prioritize culture as they grow. In the introduction to their chapter on *The Case for School Culture*, they quote Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz:

A company can grow big without losing the passion and personality that built it, but only if it's driven not by profits but by values and by people. The key is heart. If you pour your heart into your work, or into any worthy enterprise you can achieve dreams others may think impossible. (p. 1)

As an observer to the school I once called home, I can identify with this statement and with the notion that, "this ephemeral, taken-for-granted aspect of schools is often overlooked and consequently is usually absent from discussions about school improvement," (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p. 2). However, it is clear that the elusive force called "culture" is what has kept Namaste from collapse through transition. As the current Executive Director described:

When you think about just sort of like what the word Namaste means, educating children from the inside out. You know, it's really apparent at Namaste that we care about

students as human beings and citizens of the world first and for me that's a difference.

(N.N., p. 2).

Many argue that student performance reflects school culture when a school immerses students in a context where learning and achievement are valued and positive relationships are honed and developed. Although establishing a causal relationship between culture and achievement is challenging, a significant amount of literature offers correlations between school culture and student achievement (Merseeth, 2009). The author said, "Culture both defines and unites an organization around common goals and desired outcomes" (p. 130).

Returning to that music that had begun to play as the students engaged in physical activity with their peers, or socializing and smiling along the edges with others, I realize that this is still the signal for the beginning of the school day, and students and staff alike follow a well-articulated ritual to begin their day. Although the music once sounded different, music is still the universal signal for students to start their day at Namaste. Students turn towards the middle of the gymnasium and one tall, skinny, male third grade teacher remained in the center of the circle with his hands at heart's center in a prayer position.

Rituals. No words are uttered, but almost 200 students and at least 12 teachers are eerily focused on the teacher in the center of a large oval. A high energy, well known and popular song blasts out from the speakers. The teacher in the middle does a variety of cardiovascular movements and the students and other educators follow intently. Jumping jacks, star jumps, cross-lateral helicopters. They even go on the ground for push-ups in the middle of the song. The high intensity workout keeps the kids focused on their own bodies and increases the energy in the room. Even the teachers are beginning to fan themselves from the heat.

When the high intensity song ends, a slower, lower-intensity song comes on over the speakers. It is a welcomed change as teachers and students alike pant, slow down their breathing and heart rate, and fill their bodies with much needed oxygen. No words are spoken. Students and staff once again follow the teacher in the center of the oval through a series of calming, stretching movements. Teachers in skirts and dresses fully participate and modify when necessary. No one talks to one another, but there are students and staff who look to a neighbor for support with movements at times. I can see it on their faces, “Does my arm go to the windows or towards the doors?” Then they correct their own movements.

What happens at the end of the second song is almost surreal. Students and staff follow the teacher in the middle who takes deep, cleansing breaths and moves his hands above his head and to his sides. He says, “Close your eyes” and more than 90% of the room complies. I can see students faces relax and focus on their breath. He then states, “Think about someone who loves you.” Again, facial twinges, eyes lift, and students are calm and introspective. Students open their eyes, seamlessly find a partner or two and repeat the words, “Namaste, the light in me sees the light in you, Namaste,” using their hands to gesture a prayer position to one another. Each student is looking into someone else’s eyes: a teacher’s, another student’s, or an administrator’s. There is a kinship that I can feel between the individuals in the room, each exhibiting a more centered body and mind to begin the school day. All 200 students then quickly form a series of lines as if they have been doing this for decades, and follow their teachers out of the gymnasium to their classrooms. Even this act of organizing into classrooms and feeling the anticipation of the day ahead is joyful and well-choreographed.

After speaking with a student who lags behind, I reaffirm that every morning students and teachers gather for a 5 to 10-minute movement routine designed to prepare their minds and

bodies for the day ahead. Although the actual movement patterns have been updated over the past 14 years, the core of the morning movement routine remains the same. Some goals of morning movement articulated by the students are to release tension, increase focus and attention, wake up, prepare their minds and bodies for learning, and to provide a positive school-wide community experience.

The word *community* again returns with the beginning of the day ritual. By means of this ritual, students physically interact with one another in a way that acknowledges the beginning of the day. I recognized the integral part of being ready to learn has on their performance, and I recognize the bond between participants. The perception communicated by the physical act is one of care and concern for one's classmates, but "beyond this surface-level understanding, it is also the intent of the ritual to *instill* the values of ..." (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 28).

There is a "beyond surface-level under-standing" of the long-standing ritual I witnessed as a school founder and leader and as an observer. Namaste hopes that when these kids find themselves in other contexts, they will remember the message of getting your mind and body, "ready to learn" and ensure that they are each adequately prepared both physically and emotionally for the task ahead. Reflecting the words of Deal and Peterson almost exactly, this beginning of the day ritual is clearly, "infused with deeper meaning" and "help make common experiences uncommon event," (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 32).

Even more important, rituals like this morning movement give, "a cultural foundation to weather challenges, difficulties, and change" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 33). Given the transition present in the school over the last 3 years, I reflect on how grateful I am that as founders, we focus significantly on the development of these types of rituals throughout the school day and year to ensure that staff, students, and the Namaste community have a true identity that is shared,

specific, and unchanging. It is clear that these rituals still define the school community and that they have had a huge effect on all stakeholders in the school.

Students express these values and the meaning of these rituals as they take lessons beyond the school and apply their experience to other areas of life. R.F. said, “I’m active to this day, and I still hear Miss ... in my ear talking about it’s not gym class, physical education” (p. 7). The remembering of school rituals by long-time participants signifies their critical nature in the school’s ethos in both its being and in its success. As Deal and Peterson (1999) explained:

Our efforts at educational improvement often do not work to guarantee good schools for everyone. Reforms that focus only on changing structures or school governance will never succeed in building positive organic forms that will serve all our students. Reforms that bring new technologies or higher standards won’t succeed without being embedded in supportive, spirit-filled cultures, (p. 137).

Mission, vision, and values. As I continue to walk the halls of Namaste, I notice continual and unwavering references to the school’s mission and vision. On each floor, there is a poster at each end referencing the school’s vision and mission. It reads:

Vision: To change the trajectory of underserved children’s lives. *Mission:* Namaste Charter School promotes lifelong student success and a love of learning by implementing and sharing a groundbreaking educational model that combines health and wellness with academic rigor in a peaceful environment.

Shared vision establishes a focus on mutual purpose. People learn to nourish a sense of commitment in a group by developing shared images of the future they seek to create and the principles and guiding practices by which they hope to get there. Every staff member I spoke with could articulate the vision and tell me what that meant in the classroom environment. I

could hear aspects of the mission echoed in the reflections of founding students and parents. “Effective mission statements are memorable and easily and quickly understood by multiple constituencies. They describe, in unambiguous terms, an organization’s goals and serve as a guide to establish metrics or benchmarks ...” (Merseth, 2009, p. 130). School mission statements tend to be either vague or generic, often promoting to “prepare all students for life” or encouraging all to “meet their potential.” I am struck with the unique and specific mission of Namaste, which not only emphasizes the outcomes, but also the way in which those outcomes should be reached. As A.W. stated:

The light in me sees the light in you. That little blurb is really the biggest thing that I would say would define, in my memory, I must say. What does it mean to me? Sort of like I was going back to the peaceful people’s thing. It’s really what that is. Is just being able to see the good and the evil in somebody and being able to not necessarily justify it for them, but be able to sort of help them find themselves. So, being able to see what is it ... sort of a ... I can’t think of the word, but sort of being able to see the human in one another. The pure purity of it. I would say. (p. 8)

All of these elements: mission, vision, values, and rituals contribute to the culture of the school. “Different missions and purposes define outcomes that are valued and shape how energy and time are allocated by staff, students, and administrators” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 26).

Once an amorphous term, I can now feel, see, hear, and smell the peaceful school culture cultivated at Namaste. This mission and vision along with the accompanying values is clearly lived at Namaste every single day. “These statements [mission statements] reflect a culture of agency that assumes the mission is achievable and the belief that school personnel have the skills and ability to bring the mission to fruition, “(Merseth, 2009, p. 135). The mission, vision, and

values work does not lie in a glass case in the front of the school. Every member of the Namaste community works on it every day. It is alive in the every day workings of the school. This mission, vision, values combination is carried out daily in the actions and reactions of staff, students, and families at Namaste. As the staff especially has undergone significant transition, it is evident that the culture and commitment to this mission, vision, and values is what has set Namaste apart, and what continues to hold it together. “The key here lies in the culture of schools—the shared meaning these institutions create. The bedrock of cultural vitality and stability lies in the mission, purpose, values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that people share,” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 30).

The current school leader at Namaste articulates that the mission and vision of the school and the clearly defined pillars was one of the initial reasons she was interested in applying for the position. N.N. explained:

I think that it’s completely aligned to what I feel like both personal and professional values are, and so as when I think of the demographics of the students that we serve at Namaste it is incredibly reflective of my own experience as a Chicago Public School student. So, the opportunity to lean into a model that put emphasis on the importance of holistic wellness in addition to rigorous academics was one that was just aligned to the kind of work that I want to be doing and what I witnessed first-hand during my interview process. It was clear in offices, in classrooms, and in minds that these were not just words to the founders of Namaste. (p. 1)

In thinking about the elements that have carried the school to great heights at intervals over time, it is this clarity of mission, vision, and values that most clearly echoes in my mind as it did with Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot as she sketched the portraits of high performing high schools in 1983:

Schools must find ways of inspiring devotion and loyalty in teachers and students, of marking the boundaries between inside and outside, of taking a psychological hold on their members ... I do believe that good schools balance the pulls of connection to community against the contrary forces of separation from it ... the protection and solace good schools offer may also be partly approached through ideological clarity and a clear vision of institutional values. (pp. 322-323)

The simplicity, precision, and unchanging mission, vision, and values of Namaste Charter School has had a clear effect on committing both student and staff to the institution over time, even through some tumultuous change.

Relational trust and high expectations for staff. The peaceful school culture that permeates the being of Namaste is set into being by a high level of relational trust amongst teachers and between teachers and leadership. The power of trust was documented extensively in Bryk and Schneider's (2003) analysis of 400 elementary schools in Chicago over a period of 7 years. Relational trust in a school entails respect for each person's role in learning, respect for expertise, personal regard for others, and high levels of integrity when making policy and teaching decisions. These four criteria outlined by the authors are clearly present amongst the staff at Namaste and also between the staff and students. V.R. said:

One of the things that Namaste put in us, at least in me, is really understanding that like you're going to be encountering all types of people and you're going to be encountering all types of challenges, but no matter what, always look for that light in the other person.

(p. 10)

Throughout my tenure as the founder and school leader at Namaste, I focused extensively on creating the combination of both high levels of relational trust and high expectations for staff not

only from me as the leader, but from each other as colleagues. As Bryk and Schnieder (2003) asserted, the higher the levels of relational trust among the school community (principals, teachers, students, parents), the greater the improvement on standardized tests. The daily grind of creating an institution where teachers and staff actively remove themselves from the hierarchical structure that exists at schools and just listen to me as a colleague or friend helping them work through challenges has clearly taken a toll since my departure. However, those who have been staunch supporters of the school and have remained there through the turmoil validate and reiterate the importance of the balance between trust and accountability within the school setting. “In order to achieve goodness, schools must collect mostly good teachers and treat them like chosen people,” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 342).

Although I did not know of Lawrence-Lightfoot at the time, I think that could have been my mantra as a school leader. One parent even expressed their view that there is a difference in the relational trust that existed in the founding of the school between school leaders and the teachers. J.T. shared:

I think everyone misses you now. Let me tell you something, you created an environment with David like ... there you see getting together the same ... even the same as children ... that they start with Namaste. They get together and continue ... see ... watch each other. (p. 5)

Although the relational trust among and between staff and administration is not where it once was, the focus of new leadership is on rebuilding this trust. As V.R. so eloquently stated:

The light in me sees the light in you. I remember doing that every day and really understanding that no matter what you encounter, you're encountering other people with

light in them, and you're encountering other people that have a story as well as you. (p. 10).

Letting these words lead the way toward increased relational trust and high expectations for teachers will help the school find its way back to its mission, pillars, values, and vision. N.N. shared that she sees the Namaste teachers differently. "They're used to being resource," (p. 3).

In large public school systems like CPS, that feeling is not commonplace for teachers and staff who often feel confined to their particular roles in making a difference for students. "Respectful and trusting relationships are essential if educators are expected to take risks involved in change, to learn from each other, to remain deeply committed to their students and their community, and to share responsibility" (Wagner, 2006, pp. 135-136). As the new school leader continues to establish herself, return to the core vision of Namaste, and engage others in a change process, these trusting relationships will be critical.

Teachers' expectations of students. As Hattie (2012) explained, "When we are asked to name the teachers that had marked positive effects on us, the modal number is usually two or three, and the reasons typically start with comments about caring, or that they believed in me" (p. 78). One of the most critical levers for increased student achievement is teachers' expectations of students. Layered onto this is ensuring that student expectations of themselves, which are primarily created by teachers, are also challenging themselves to reach higher, longer, and broader. "When teachers attribute students' successes and failures to internal factors rather than external factors, they in turn, believe their actions impact student achievement" (Donohoo, 2017, pp. 10-11). This may seem somewhat obvious or mundane, but it is clear through substantive research that there are many teachers whose personal beliefs about students often stymie their achievement levels.

Many times, teacher expectations of student performance are a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, this prophecy need not go in the negative direction. “There are differences in achievement gains relating to whether teachers believe that achievement is difficult to change because it is fixed and innate, compared to teachers who believe that achievement is changeable (the latter leading to higher gains)” (Hattie, 2012, p. 92).

Despite the sobering statistics of the McKinley Park community that less than 50% of adults over the age of 25 have a high school diploma or greater, the expectation set by myself as the founder of Namaste was that all students can and should be prepared to attend and succeed in college or university coursework should they desire to do so. This expectation was the foundation of the mission, vision, and values that were previously discussed and have been deeply engrained in the cultural community of families and staff at Namaste. With a new leader at the helm of Namaste who was the first in her family to graduate from college, this notion is even more vibrant today than when the school was first born. She often states that she “sees herself in every single one of the students at Namaste,” and uses this to align with current students and help them through difficult or disruptive times in their lives, much like she remembers her own experiences.

Teachers at Namaste believe that every student can and should be successful just as its new leader proclaims. Making students both highly academically successful, positive, and productive members of a community is the ultimate goal that Namaste staff have coalesced around over the years, even through the transitions. “If teachers and schools are going to have expectations, then they must make the expectations challenging, appropriate, and checkable, such that all students are achieving what is deemed valuable,” (Hattie, 2012, p. 92). Many alumni students’ experiences reflect this exact sentiment. R.F. said:

Like all this, you know, throughout your whole life, they're talking about like, "oh you're going to go about" like, "oh, you're gonna go to college," you know, going to high school. But even at Namaste, you know, at such a young age, they gave you kids to put this thought in their head, "I'm gonna go to college," you know. So, since you're like 11- or 10-years old, even before that, you're gonna go to college. And like at the time, you know, "okay, I'm gonna go to college," but now, it's like "I'm finished with high school and that was a huge wake-up call. Oh, my God, like I'm actually going to college, you know." I couldn't, it's like, and I remember at the beginning it was real hard, so just the whole thought process, like, you know, this is actually here, all these years, you know, preparing. Namaste contributed definitely and with that. Now they all start ... it was like ... ah ... like a butterfly effect, kinda like it sets you up for the next step in life, and ... (p. 5-6)

R.F. is now a college freshman at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana majoring in engineering. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school and leaves two younger brothers as students currently at Namaste. R.F.'s story is one that highlights the success of Namaste through the creation and belief in a mission and set of values that set R.F. on a path to success.

Even for students who struggled to commit to school, the alumni interviews indicated the same teacher expectations for student performance. V.R. shared:

I tend to be just a little lazy when it comes to school work, a little bit. So, I think Namaste did a really good job of being on me about, you know, getting into high school and doing your things right and really preparing" (V.R., p. 6).

D.F., an alum who spent 9 years at Namaste, 4 years in a CPS high school, and went to college on a football scholarship only to drop out of college 6 months later due to an injury, reflected on the expectations teachers had for him at Namaste and how these beliefs continue to drive his own expectations of himself:

I mean we all make mistakes and its human. It's a human thing, and being in the city of Chicago doesn't make it any better, and there's a lot of ... there's a lot of ... there's a lot of paths you can go down in Chicago. You can go down, you know, you can be very successful and do a lot of great things, but then you know, there's always that, that like dark little ally that you know, sometimes you wonder off into, but it's how you manage it to be honest, you know. We all fall [into a] sad little pit, but you just got to get up and you know, go get yourself some ... something. (p. 5)

As I continue to stroll the halls of Namaste, I see the stories of successful graduates, but it is stories like D.F.'s that truly show the long-term success, the expectations, the commitment of the staff, and the culture at Namaste to creating expectations within and among students that outweigh their familial experiences. "One of the most striking qualities of these good schools is their consistent, unswerving attitude towards student," (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 342). D.F., an alum, articulated this very sentiment when he stated:

So, it was just you know, the standard that, like you guys give us different standards and that we had to meet up to each year and it just you know, built to the, just keep prospering each year. It was just something different, something higher, every year, it just wasn't like the same thing. (p. 3)

Another student described it has Namaste doing a, “really good job of instilling values in you that you’re going to carry on for the rest of your educational career. I think a lot of, you know, self-determination saying like, ‘you know, you can do this and that’” (V.R., p. 7).

Overall, the culture created during the founding years at Namaste through clear articulation and ongoing development regarding the school’s founding vision, mission, values, and expectations are evident in the reflections of all constituencies. “Culture, that seemingly invisible yet enormously powerful influence on organizations, plays a large role in the success of schools ... a laser-like focus on mission, makes these schools intense yet enormously rewarding places to study and work” (Merseth, 2009, p. 147).

Collective Efficacy

As R.F. (and other alumni) clearly articulated, it was not one particular teacher at Namaste, although he remembers several that set him up for success and for a college education, rather it was the collective belief and collective effort of everyone—the teachers, counselors, administrators and teacher assistants—which was the determining factor in his successful outcome as a Namaste High School graduate. This collective effort, set up through the school culture, values, and commitments that were lived and breathed every day at Namaste now has an identity in the educational research literature: collective efficacy. “When teachers believe that together they and their colleagues can impact student achievement, they share a sense of collective teacher efficacy” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 3). According to Hattie (2012), “collective teacher efficacy has an effect size of 1.57, more than three times the effect size of socioeconomic status, which has an effect size of 0.52” (Appendix). Collective teacher efficacy is a contribution to student achievement, which comes solely from the school and not from the home or students themselves. When teachers work together and have confidence in one another, it enables the

team to undertake challenges, persist with all students, and work harder with students who exhibit challenges in their learning. The staff has confidence in each other, and they collectively work to address student need.

At Namaste, collective efficacy is evidenced through teacher interaction and reflection. Through my day-long observation, it was clear that there is not only a “we can” attitude present but teachers throughout the day refer to the students as “our students.” Even the lunch-ladies at Namaste know each student’s name as they walk through the line at breakfast or lunch. They know their favorite meals, sides, and fruits. They joke with students and put smiles on each of their faces. When teachers see students with their heads hanging low, they find something to say to cheer them up, and put a smile on their face.

Students’ articulate the difference they feel with schools they went to either before or after Namaste. Alumni D.F. said:

Hallways were probably the worst. Even though every hallway’s not loud, like there’s always some type of you know, like just different, just atmosphere, like in a building you can tell, you know, if people are like, just kind of have a negative attitude ... and you know, it was ... it’s a big transition. But it was different though. When I came to high school, I was like no one cares about me. You know, it was just ... I don’t know ... it was different. It was very different. (p. 2)

Parents and staff also articulate the notion of collective efficacy present throughout the founding of Namaste without using that specific vocabulary. One parent stated, “you never give up” (J.T., p. 1). This feeling of “never giving up” permeated my next visit to a classroom.

Walking into the “yellow room,” as it is called, is like walking right into sunshine. More than 30 kindergarten students walk around almost like little ants working together to solve

problems, look for similarities, and complete tasks assigned by their two teachers who are almost unnoticeable amongst the business of the classroom. The walls are filled with evidence of student learning and ownership. A student did almost 100% of the writing on the walls, and it is clear that students are comfortable and confident in their classroom.

I then walk up to a small group of students constructing what I thought was a tower by on the carpet by the library. I ask the students what they are doing. A cluster of boys and girls reply with one word, almost in unison, “inquiry.” I was so shocked that this was their answer that I wanted to delve a little deeper to better understand what the students meant by their word, “inquiry.” Five year-olds eloquently explained to me, one building on the sentence begun by another, that they had spent some time in McKinley Park and decided to do an “inquiry” study on ducks. They had observed ducks in the large pond at the park and they had some questions about seeing them there, preparing for winter, and how they would survive given that the lake was likely to freeze as the winter approached. The activity they were currently engaged in was attempting to build a duck shelter to ensure the ducks stayed warm during the winter. The students’ goal was to ensure that all of the ducks they saw on the lake had access to enough shelter to keep them warm during the winter. They knew that ducks had “durable” feathers (yes, a kindergarten student actually used that word!) so it did not need to be elaborate, but could be a small area where the ducks would find safety and a respite from the cold on the harshest of days.

These 5 year-olds worked in unison as if music was being played. A concerto conductor was conducting them, and they had been working together for years. The teachers who were facilitating the students working together were not overly concerned with teaching sight words or differing vowel sounds as is typically observed in a kindergarten classroom. They were rather

preoccupied with ensuring students could ask and answer questions and work seamlessly to find a solution to a problem that they found and were interested in solving.

This is exactly the type of willingness to try new teaching approaches that Donohoo described in her book *Collective Efficacy* (2017), “the theory is fostering collective teacher efficacy to realize increased student achievement, and it involves creating opportunities for meaningful collaboration, empowering teachers, establishing goals and high expectations, and helping educators interpret results and provide feedback” (p. 35). The two teachers in this classroom have some exceptionally high expectations and turn over the ownership of the problem and finding its solution to their 5 year old students. There is no rote repeating of high frequency words and clapping out of syllables and letters to attempt to ensure they are recognized and spelled correctly by these students. Instead, these two teachers work together modeling this collaboration to students, and the whole school learns from them later in the day at professional development where they are scheduled to present on their inquiry project with the students. This provides another opportunity to grow collective efficacy as it places the teachers in a leadership role, which Donohoo described as having a profound effect on creating a “robust” sense of collective efficacy.

Adult Time and Feedback

In this kindergarten classroom, it is clear that students have regular and focused one-to-one time with one of the adults in the classroom to further hone their questioning skills and their problem solving behaviors. This one-on-one time is another frequently observed behavior at Namaste that students’ experience, alumni remember, and parents acknowledge. It is also another one of factors that Hattie (2012) noted affects student achievement greatly, with “an effect size of 0.81, putting it in the top 10 influences on achievement” (Appendix B). As Hattie explained:

Feedback can be provided in many ways: through affective processes, increased effort, motivation, or engagement; by providing students with different cognitive processes, restructuring understandings, confirming to the student that he or she is correct or incorrect, indicating that more information is available or needed ... indicating alternative strategies with which to understand particular information. (p. 129)

One of the issues Hattie referred to in one-to-one time with the teacher and providing feedback is balancing how much work the teacher is doing and how much work the student is doing. When I scanned this Kindergarten classroom, it was clear that the balance is in favor of the students wrestling with concepts with one and other rather than the teacher imparting a vast array of facts into the students' brains. As I watched the teachers interact with the students, I heard questions instead of statements during their interactions. These questions help motivate students to continue on in their discovery and reach to higher levels. Students do not wait for teacher instructions or direction to continue in their inquiry. Students take risks in order to be the first to solve the inquiry in which they are engaged. There is clearly, "a classroom climate in which there is minimum peer reactivity to not knowing, or acknowledgement of errors in which there is low personal risk involved in responding publicly and failing" (Hattie, 2012, p. 140).

It was clear throughout the remainder of the observation that these teachers are simply facilitators in student learning. They do not view themselves as the sole expert on a strategy or topic where they are teaching the students. They instead facilitate interaction and students finding answers to their own problems, skills that will permeate their success in schools for the rest of their lives.

As these kindergarten students pause their work to go to recess and lunch, I continue my observations throughout the school. As I walk outside of the kindergarten classroom, I approach

a table that is located in the hallway with signs of learning all around, it is as if it was its own classroom. Sticky chart paper line the walls with reminders of different skills that students can use to build their own “fluent reading behavior” to “read like a teacher sounds.” Reminders of how to answer questions and summarize, finding words by skimming and rereading sections, and answering with complete thoughts and sentences are all things I can see and read about atop the stark white wall as it descends into the bright blue wainscoting.

There is a small group of three students and one teacher reading a small book together. I sit down to observe this focused teacher to student interaction. Although it is not specifically one-to-one time, the teacher takes several opportunities during the session with the students to work one-to-one with each of them. The teacher, a reading interventionist, is working with three students who are more than one trimester behind the grade level expectation for this point in the year in reading fluency and comprehension. Her voice is slow and metered, but her tone is upbeat and positive. She is moving at a quick pace and expects students to follow as well.

The three students, two boys and a girl, do not have time to be off-task. The pace and intensity of the teacher’s voice and movements have the students moving at an ambitious pace. As Merseth (2009) stated in her review of successful schools in *Inside Urban Charter Schools*, “Academic content dominates nearly every minute of every class period, with little class time allotted to conversation or activities outside the agenda” (p. 201). The teacher’s instructions are verbal and written, and she redirects students with a slight tap on the hand when necessary.

Following along diligently, the students are working on their prosody, or expression while reading to better understand character actions and intentions from the story. The teacher has three words written on a small white board, and each student has copied them onto their strategy bookmark “stress, emphasis, and appropriate phrasing.” After they review how using

expression can help the reader understand the character's intentions and actions better, the teacher has each student begin reading at a slightly different time. Each student is reading softly aloud, and the teacher turns in 20-second increments to each student so as to hear each student read during each minute of instructional practice time. She makes notes on a small graph sitting next to her.

As the teacher listens to each student read, she refers to the same words that are on her board and on each student's bookmark. She says:

I notice you are not using correct phrasing. Try scooping up all of the words until you get to a comma or a period, which tells you to pause or stop reading. If you need to read until one of these punctuation appear, do that in your head, and then when you know how the phrasing should sound, read it aloud.

This specific task level feedback is critical for the student to improve his reading fluency and comprehension success. It is very clear to the student what he is doing, why he is doing it, and how his performance is in comparison to where the expectation lies. As Hattie (2012) stated, "The art of effective teaching is to provide the right form of feedback at, or just above, the level at which the student is working" (p. 136).

In a matter of what seemed to be only 5 minutes, but was actually a 30-minute lesson, the students had their bookmarks filled out to set a goal for their fluent reading, and the teacher had taken individual notes on each student allowing her to prepare for the next day during a planning time. I heard a short beep, which was the teacher's phone alarm expiring, an indication that the reading intervention lesson was over and the students should return to class. They all put the book and book mark in the folders without prompting, stood up, pushed in their chairs, and did

not say a word as they left the table with materials in hand, smiles on their faces, and the challenge to make it back to class in 30 seconds or less provided by the teacher.

Throughout my observations at Namaste, it was clear that adult one-to-one time is made a priority first through a significant amount of adults in the building. As I walked down the hallway, I saw at least one if not two to three adults in each classroom and several interventionists lining the hallways and stairwells with small instructional groups and many additional adults during unstructured times. Everyone has a purpose, but the first purpose is interacting with students. Every adult seemed to know every student's name. Observing these interactions reinforced the "our students" motto that has been described already by so many alumni, teachers, and parents.

Family Engagement

As I complete my observation of this small intervention reading group, I walk outside to see where those kindergarten students who were trying to save the ducks went. They are at recess, a 20-minute a day activity, which occurs for all students in the school before lunch. I remember starting this initiative when many thought it was not a good idea to send all students outside due to the violence plaguing the city. However, there is a plethora of research that talks about the importance of students receiving unstructured time during school to let out their energy so they can focus on learning inside the classroom.

I then walk outside. It is clear that the hope I had observed on my drive in is also evident outside on the blacktop. This is the same blacktop where I attempted to park earlier in the morning. It is clear that it gets substantial use, as there is an iron fence, which surrounds it with considerable wear and a very tall net that extends into what could be a second or third story above. There are holes in the net all the way to the top, a sign that this is a well-loved area of the

school where students are healthy and active so that they can return to the classroom ready to learn in the academic setting.

Six adults, all family members of students, are outside playing with students and organizing recess. Each of them have a clipboard in hand and a clearly defined role: hula hooper, jump roper, soccer monitor, freeze dance free space, peace place monitor, and an extra person to roam. As the students move seamlessly through different activities, families arrive to watch and participate with other students. This is just one indication throughout my day where I see the incredibly important value that Namaste has placed on family involvement.

Family volunteers are present at the school on a daily basis to monitor and facilitate recess and lunch, which most educators know is a dreaded time of day. But every family member has a smile on his or her face, and smaller siblings relish the opportunity to spend some extra time with their older siblings. Soon enough, these little ones will be Namaste students in their own right. It is clear that moms who are here are not simply observing these students, but have been trained and meet regularly to discuss the challenges and opportunities these unstructured play times create for students. They created a “peacekeeper of the week” and students regularly self-select to take a break in the peace place (which is just a peace sign written in chalk outside of the iron fence) when they seem over-stimulated.

Parents have gained an understanding, a respect, and a harmony with the school’s mission and vision. Typical yelling of “stop it” and “come here” on the elementary playground is not present on this playground. Most of the monitors speak both Spanish and English with the students, again reminding me of the community connection and the value the school places on bilingualism and biculturalism.

I walk over to speak to one of the recess monitors, a woman in her late 30s. She explains that she has had two students at Namaste and her final son will enter into kindergarten in the fall. One of her sons is in high school now, and the other one is in the middle school. She explains how becoming part of the Namaste community has changed the fabric of their family. Not only has she learned about using logical consequences as punishments when necessary in her household, but she also has built on her role as her child's first teacher and has built a strong relationship with every one of her sons' teachers' over the years. Every expectation that the teachers have of her children, she has learned to have as well. Her interactions with teachers are respectful, full of appreciation, admiration, and love. She harkened back to a word I heard in so many alumni interviews: *family*. She has open, honest, direct, and regular communication with her sons' teachers. Every teacher has given her their personal cell phone numbers, and she has used them without trepidation. These relationships are characterized by authenticity rather than the somewhat facetious and cordial relationships often established between teachers and parents.

In addition to her work on portraiture, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) also explored the necessity of building strong connections and trust between parents and teacher. In her book, *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*, she wrote:

I believe that the educational landscape has changed substantially, creating a different set of conditions that have powerfully reshaped and complicated the encounters between families and schools. The major changes in family structure, the rise in the number of women employed outside the home, the rapid increase in the influx of immigrant groups into our cities and schools, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the shifts in the power and preoccupation of teachers' unions, and the velocity of technological changes and increased access to cyber-space, to name a few factors, have all had an

influence on redefining the roles of and relationships between families and schools. (p. xxiv)

In the birth and creation of Namaste, family engagement was a critical lever to our overall model. We created many formal and informal ways for parents to be regular parts of our school with the goal being that the more families are engaged in our mission and vision, the faster student growth would increase overall, and the more regular our expectations of behavior and conduct would come to fruition. Deal and Peterson (1999) said:

It is easy for cohesive school cultures to become exclusionary, distant, walled off from the community. In some schools, the culture encourages staff to draw together and shut out parents. Different languages, interactions styles, and educational beliefs too often create a sharp divide between professionals working inside schools and parents waiting outside. Building a cohesive school community means shaping a culture that reaches out and touches everyone: students, teachers, staff administrators, parents, and community. (p. 135.

In the first years of Namaste, we became an officially donned, “community school.” Although the stream of funding associated with this designation quickly dried up, the same expectations remained as part of the internal fabric of the school. Open communication with families and clear communication about expectations on all sides is clearly still present and a defining aspect of the school’s being.

Outside the school, as I continue to observe recess, there is a huge glass case with several announcements and regular information for families inside to help protect it from the elements. One notice boasts of student-led conferences, a time when students and families come together to the school to reflect on the trimester, collectively share time and academic activities together,

and talk to the teachers about progress towards goals and expectations. The usually tense 15 minutes of “in and out” time that I remember as a teacher is not a staple at Namaste. Instead, families witness for themselves what children can do and what they still need help with, ensuring that the conversation with the teacher is relatively clear, direct, and substantiated by the work observed by the parents of the student in that particular moment.

A flyer for a “Family Breakfast” for grade levels is present, which promotes an aspect of the school that has been universally recognized as a tenant to the school’s being by both insiders and outsiders. The structure won a “Promising Practices” award that is placed right next to the advertisement for next week’s middle school breakfast, and as usual, the flyer is both in Spanish and in English. Friday Family Breakfast is when families attend and receive the same healthy breakfast as students, which gives them first-hand experience with the healthy food that allows their children to learn in an uninterrupted way every day. Teachers attend and model conversation at the table connect with families and ensure recipes for meal contents are received and discussed. Families then get to stay for the “morning movement” ritual and engage with their students, teachers, and fellow parents at the school.

As Merseth (2009) stated in her review of promising practices in urban charter schools, “Once the euphoria of ‘winning the lottery’ has passed, the shared responsibilities of schools and parents begin in earnest: ongoing family support is critical to the operation of these schools,” (p. 165). This is clearly the case at Namaste, where parents are a regular fixture of the school and interwoven into almost every aspect of its community. As J.T., a founding parent said:

Parents, you were here. The parents were able to exercise with Namaste. You basically put your school for the community and ... you even created a park for the parents, and

the students, for the community. Eventually, with the community being able to start co-parenting with us, Namaste's helping the community. (p. 2).

I reflect on the fact that a parent himself referred to the school as a co-parent, a detail that did not escape my observation.

School Building and Grounds

I watch as one group heads out of the rot iron fence surrounding the blacktop area and walks about a half-block down the road. I remember that when I began Namaste, we had grand aspirations to build large, green play spaces for students to get their extensive physical activity and to become a beacon for the community. We researched rooftop play spaces and gardens and fondly visited one built by our same construction company in a North side private school with about 25 times the budget as ours. As I reflect on the years researching and hoping, I feel a sense of pride as the students in line arrive at the Namaste playground at the corner of Ashland and 37th street despite this being a dream still unrealized.

As I approach the gated entrance to the playground, a bright colored mural greets me. On it, a caption which reads, "On October 9, 2010, 300 volunteers built this playground in 6 hours. It is a testament to what can occur when people work together for the common good. Enjoy it; respect it; honor it." The bright red and yellow of the playground seemed not one day faded since that fateful day back in October, 2010. Children run and jump, swing and slide, and sit under large trellis benches overlooking beautifully colored flower and vegetable gardens. Despite the unrealized dream of a high-tech, rooftop play space and garden, this once abandoned lot is vibrant with life. It sits in deep contrast to the lots around it.

Across the street is an abandoned warehouse, which stretches several city blocks and marked by a recent tragedy where a fire engulfed the mid-section of the warehouse and it has

been half-taken down. Next to the lot is an abandoned car business, and across the small street on the other side of 37th street is another abandoned warehouse with a “For Sale” sign. This is a building I know well, as we attempted to purchase or rent it back a few years prior, but the contamination left from the centuries old dog food then zipper factory rendered the building basically uninhabitable. The scent of the chicken factory, which sits just on the other side of the car lot, is a vibrant reminder of where we are despite the serenity of the actual lot once we are on it. Not only do I remember the day the playground was built, but I also remember all the planning and preparation that went into this lot’s transformation—a symbol of light and life in this often challenged city.

The lot sat for more than 50 years with nothing atop it but garbage and tall grass. It too had a “For Sale” sign on it ever since the school moved less than one mile down the road in 2007. When our building plans were finalized and it was clear that no 120-year-old building could sustain a rooftop play space and garden, I picked up the phone and called the number on the faded billboard that advertised the lot’s availability. A middle-aged man answered the phone, and later that week he met me at the lot to get a better understanding of my request. As a young charter school founder, I could not afford the lot on my own, and the school’s finances were tied up in the \$7 million project that was going to begin imminently to solve the school’s need to house a full k-eighth grade institution at its final period of growth. After a significant amount of coaxing, the owner agreed to match our long-term lease terms of the building down the road and help the school achieve its dream of providing a play space for its students and for the community for a minimal lease amount. However, that did not end the challenge faced when trying to put a play space on a vacant piece of land, which bordered the Chicago Stockyards. Although Namaste found corporate sponsors and a non-profit partner willing to support its

efforts, the land was extremely contaminated and basically needed to be completely dug up and replaced in order to be viable for a school playground. As with every other impediment we faced, we persevered and we triumphed.

In *Shaping School Culture*, Deal and Peterson (1999) highlighted the symbolism of architecture and the physical plant, which often communicate meaning for schools. The authors stated, “The physical setting and the school’s symbolic appearance have a lot of time to exert an influence,” (p. 63). Deal and Peterson discussed four main ways that architecture of schools symbolize and reinforce culture: signaling what is important; architecture as a way to tie a community together; providing a message of deeper purpose and values; and motivating staff, students, and the community by forging pride in their school. This playground and its vibrant message of rebirth through the physical structures and motifs of play and growing symbolize Namaste’s underlying values and purpose while providing a space that is beautiful, functional, and community centered. The playground also provides a remembrance of pride for all of the volunteers involved, which included many of the recess monitor volunteers today.

As we step onto the playground, I can see the pride with which they look at the playground structures, the water barrels, recycling center, and peace pole, which were all created on that unifying day. Although the playground remains locked for security reasons, the school opens it frequently to be used by neighbors and the community and provides a vibrant respite from the despair surrounds them across the city and even within this community at times.

As I head back into the school with the students, I start to notice and acknowledge all of the physical elements that reinforce the vision, mission, and values I confronted at the beginning of my visit. There are covert and overt representations of health and wellness, and numerous visual representation of flames, of peace, and of reflection. There is a bulletin board in the

middle school hallway with the words, “Fired Up!” on it and student goals displayed underneath. High school acceptance letters line the hallway on this middle grades floor alongside the shiny, gray lockers that students regularly go in and out of throughout the day. A huge mural lines the hallway from the “Class of 2012,” the school’s first graduating class, with the words “peacemakers, up-standers, innovators” listed as the descriptors of the young adults into which they grew during their tenure at Namaste.

College pennants adorn the doorframes of each classroom: DePaul University, The University of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, Northeastern Illinois University, Tulane, University of Illinois, University of Michigan ... these are the ones that remain in my brain, in my soul. I used to be concerned and think, “How are these students going to engage in this type of comradely that is so foreign to them in most cases?” And now, I watch the stories of alumni who internalized these messages taught by these advisories, and they are reaching dreams they made in elementary schools—to be just like many of their teachers and go to these highly-touted universities.

Each advisory is led by a Namaste staff member and is defined by its college or university. Students learn the university creed, the fight song, and Namaste teacher alums get tee shirts and other university swag donated to motivate students. Hallways are lined with reminders for “College Wednesdays” when students and staff alike wear college gear as a reminder of their goal: college and career readiness as they enter high school. Hallway expectations are clearly posted, and students walk with urgency and purpose, often stopping briefly to review the accolades of a colleague or notice a new acceptance letter. As Merseth (2009) said as she described those elements that define five successful charter schools:

Respondents repeatedly attributed their school's success to structured, systematic, and coherent work environments ... the operational rhythms of these schools extend beyond the predictable machinery of comfort and familiarity, and they actually harness a coherent alignment among structures, systems, and culture to aggressively and purposefully propel them toward meeting their missions. (p. 196)

The work environment at Namaste depicted in its hallways, grounds, and classrooms is one of functional rather than militaristic order, one of sincerity and serenity rather than performance, one of high expectations and personal accountability to those expectations.

The Name

The ultimate symbol in the physical environment that surrounds the school is its name. "Many names provide clues to both students and community about the school's meaning and cultural values," (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 65). I recall the challenge that we faced in the founding of the school with the schools' desired name, *Namaste*. We thought long and hard before naming the school, but felt that finding a name that defined the school's ethos would be critical in creating this ethos from scratch.

A memory seared into my mind is the call I received after being awarded the charter in December of 2003. On the other end of the line, the Director of the Charter Schools Office at the CPS indicated that to move forward, we would need to find an alternative name for the school. I spent weeks meeting with personnel and investigating the hesitation with using such a powerful and important symbol for our school. We did not want to call our school *Hermitage Street School* or *McKinley Park Charter School*. We wanted our school to define us and to be the first indication of the pride our students, staff, and community felt in our institution. One board member of the CPS at the time was a Muslim American who was concerned about the spiritual

nature of the word and feared that others might construe this as a violation of the separation of church and state. A doctor himself, he was clear on the need for *Namaste* and excited about its mission but concerned about what this all important external factor signified to others and what he was ultimately responsible for as a member of the board of directors.

After several weeks of research, I wrote a memorandum to the Board of Directors at CPS and went to a meeting to present it to some of the trustees. In it, I described the secular but incredibly critical nature of our new school's name and implored them to reconsider their request to alter the name. After several presentations, phone calls and meetings, the board acquiesced to our request and *Namaste Charter School* as the name of a new institution was born.

On this day, almost 15 years after those series of meetings, I am truly confronted with the “symbolic power” that is offered by the name, *Namaste*. *Namaste* is a name that binds the community together. Before joining this community, most have never heard the word, *Namaste*. A Sanskrit word, many might hear it at the beginning and end of a yoga session and even participate in saying it without a full appreciation for the word. As *Namaste* has defined it, “the light in me sees the light in you.” Students and staff alike use these words on a regular basis in their instructions, their motivations, and their redirections of students. Even families and staff use the name to ensure that despite the recent turmoil and leadership transition, the school's heart and mind stay consistent.

Namaste is an incredibly powerful word, a powerful name, and a powerful reminder for those currently at the school and for those who have departed. When asked what defined his time at *Namaste*, in a single word or small phrase, A.W. responded, “I would have to say the school's logo. The light in me sees the light in you. Is that little blurb is really the biggest thing that I would say would define ... (p. 7). Another alum, V.R., replied:

The way that they taught us here is the light in me sees the light in you. And it stands for it, and so that was really cool. It means I'm going to see the light in other people and really looking not only for the light in other people, but like when you have opposing argument and conflicting viewpoints, it's really looking at where that person is coming from and really understanding the context of different people. (p. 11)

It is clear that Namaste has become a symbol of what the school stands for, what its core beliefs are, and how people conduct themselves in and outside of the school community. "Educators, students and community connect in powerful ways to the symbols and logos of a school. They identify with these mundane but inexpressible signs of their institution with the emotions and sentiments that last a lifetime. "Symbols, signs, and signals link everyone to the deeper purposes and meaning of the school" (Deal & Peterson, 1999, pp. 67-68).

The Day at Namaste: Lessons Learned

It was a challenging day for me at Namaste. My first as a non-staff member, as simply an observer with no control on follow up or follow through. On my drive and walk into the school, I anticipated this challenge, much like the challenges that surrounded me as I drove up to the institution, but it proved to be greater than expected. The elements that I observed that contributed to the school's "goodness," which is much more than simply its effectiveness, more directly and substantially affected my soul. "Looking for points of thematic convergence is like searching for the patterns of texture and color in a weaving" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). I celebrated, I wept, I reflected, and I ended with a true sense of hope, of rebirth, of renewal, and of reawakening. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) described in her first official school portrait:

The whole includes people, structures, relationships, ideology, goals, intellectual substance, motivation, and will. It includes measurable indices such as attendance

records, truancy rates, vandalism to property, percentages going on to college. But it also encompasses less tangible, more elusive qualities that can only be discerned through close, vivid description, through subtle nuances, through detailed narratives that reveal the sustaining values of an institution. (p. 23)

As the school day ended, I watched teachers embracing students, calling each by name as they exited the classroom and proceed down the hallway or down the flights of stairs to the front entrance where they entered so many hours before. As each caught the first glimpse of his or her mother or father, aunt or sister, the huge smile that I observed upon entrance and decent of the stairway reappeared. Families waited patiently whether in the car line or on foot to have their child called for departure. Teachers and staff opened car doors and used the visible sign in the window to call students names on a walkie-talkie so they were ready to exit. When these students arrived at cars, teachers diligently ensured they were buckled in safely and reminded parents to have a wonderful evening and to drive safely. I have never witnessed a dismissal procedure quite like that in place at Namaste since its inception. Often, in the haste of families and teachers to complete the school day, students simply “run wild” and disperse into a large sea of adults to find their next supervisor. However, at Namaste, it is critical to live the words of the name of the school, “the light in me sees the light in you,” at the end of every day.

Although the system takes a good 15 minutes to complete, I see very little agitation from students, parents, friends, relatives, or teachers. Every individual takes time to get all students to the right place, ensuring that their light still shines brightly, even at the end of an incredibly long school day. This deliberate, intricate process is a symbolic way to conclude by reflections and the visit to the school I once called home. The school I built almost with my own two hands, and for which I felt so responsible for so many years.

As I walk out of the school's front doorway and sign out in the visitor book, I look back to the large, imposing building that I once knew so intimately. I realize that there are a substantial number of indelible marks that I made in the founding of the school and so many made by the other founders whether they be students, staff, or families. Ideas turned into a reality that defied all odds, and that, despite some current angst in transition, still sees the light in every single person that enters and exits the building.

Namaste. The light in me, sees the light in you.

CHAPTER FIVE

Implications for Leadership

Charter Schools remain a prominent discussion and debate topic for educators, politicians, communities, and families alike. Despite this often passionate debate, there is hope that there are significant lessons that can be learned from charter schools and applied to all types of schools to continue to help improve the outcomes for all children, but especially for those most adversely affected by our current educational reality: those in poor and minority communities.

In this study, I looked in-depth at the experiences of founding teachers, students, and parents at one, single-site charter school in a south-side community in Chicago. I compared those long-held experiences and beliefs with an intense set of observations over several days at the end of the 2016-2017 school year at Namaste, which at the time of this study was its thirteenth year of operation. I interviewed a variety of stakeholders: parents, staff, and alumni students who could now reflect on their experiences at Namaste, as well as the experiences they had in the time since leaving Namaste and experienced many additional educational environments. Interwoven throughout is my own reflection as the school's founder and leader for more than a decade, and a true creator. Although the school has undergone some turmoil in the past 2 years with a series of three different school leaders, it now seems to have its feet firmly in the place of transitioning its founder to an outside role, and finding a school leader to carry on the mission and vision of the school guided by its original intent.

Accepting Imperfections

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) said:

The search for “good” schools is elusive and disappointing if by goodness we mean something close to perfection ... in fact, one could argue that a consciousness about imperfections and a willingness to admit them ... is one of the important ingredients in “good” schools. (p. 309)

In each constituent’s reflections, there was a clear acknowledgement of imperfection and a clear desire and commitment to ongoing growth and continued development. This is a crucial element for Namaste given its current state of new and emergent leadership and any school looking to continuously improve, grow, and prosper as a community of high achievement.

When students reflect on their time at Namaste and their time since, they highlight the fact that everything was not always “sunshine and roses” and that there were many elements, times, and places that could be improved or even needed improvement at times. However, it was the way that both the school addressed these challenges themselves that modeled the problem solving and growth mindset that would be critical for these students as they continued their lives’ paths outside of the school.

As I reflect on the long-term vision, “Changing the trajectory of underserved children’s lives,” I remember that as the school leader I would always talk to teachers, colleagues, and the governing board of directors about the fact that reaching this vision wasn’t possible during students’ nine short years at the school. Rather, it would be crucial to set students on a path and follow them through the formative high school years to ensure that even when they face obstacles they would be able to see the way through. Accepting the imperfections in their lives and in their decision making would be crucial to their life-long success. That was modeled for 9 years throughout their experience at Namaste. D.F. said:

I mean we all make mistakes and its human. It's a human thing and being in the city of Chicago doesn't make it any better, and there's a lot of ... there's a lot of paths you can go down in Chicago. We all fall at times into a sad little pit but you just got to get up and you know, go get yourself something. (p. 5)

Accepting imperfections and continuing to work toward school growth and improvement was also a key learning from my conversations with parents and staff. While we were constantly challenged to improve and grow as a staff, being imperfect gave us the drive and commitment to move forward. It gave the staff the strength to take risks and try something new, even when unproven to help students achieve. It gave them the strength to get up again when failure prevailed and not give up in the face of adversity. As R.A. stated, "Namaste's expectations for all staff were high, but there was always support to grow and develop. It was unlike any other school in its support for teachers and growing to be the best we could be" (p. 2).

As the school leader, I often used the mantra, "support precedes accountability," This notion has much research behind it as well. Muhammed and Hollie (2011) stated, "The first duty of a transformational leader is to provide his or her staff with the resources necessary to achieve the desired objectives. Support precedes accountability. Accountability without support and guidance is not only ineffective but it is unethical" (p. 28). The support to address imperfections and the assertion that continually working to improve was a mind-set that permeated both my leadership and my more recent visit as an observer to Namaste.

The same notion of accepting imperfections rang true as I reflected about challenging times with parents. I remember how distraught I was as a school leader when the first student transferred out of Namaste. As a school of choice, I knew that was always an option, but I never dreamed that a parent would get so angry about something that occurred at school that they

would immediately pull a child out of school and transfer him to a neighborhood school with so many less services and opportunities. And then I sat there, about two weeks into the inaugural school year and had a parent sitting across from me letting me know that her son was not going to be returning to Namaste because of the way the windows swung out towards the kids who were playing out at recess was too dangerous, and she would not let her son play at recess if that was the only place to play. I really had to reflect and remember that everyone could and would make their own choices at times, and this was not a personal attack or an attack on Namaste but a choice that this family made and probably many more would make in the future. And, they did. But, as a staff and a school with a mission, we kept on going.

Now too, in a time of significant transition, the new school leader harkens back to this exact leadership lesson. She expressed the need to value and stay true to the foundational elements of the school while finding new ways to reach the goals set forth initially and new goals that are necessitated by new understandings. A recent professional development one Friday began with the quote, “The forms of our personal learning challenges are not infinitely different. There is more than one crater on the dark side of the moon, but not an endless number” (Wagner, 2006, p. 203). Accepting the imperfections that exist in the school, especially in a time of transition, is crucial to enabling everyone to face challenges head on and take risks rather than being averse to what could be. As the new leader, N.N., shared, “We think about a mission and vision of an organization and to be able to build on something that already exists” (p. 1).

The new school leader reflected back that she has been spending a lot of time learning and with a goal to get, “back to what was there foundationally” (p. 3). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) said, “The search should be for ‘good enough’ schools—not meant to imply minimal standards of talent and competence, but rather to suggest a view that welcomes change and

anticipates imperfection” (p. 311). This new impassioned school leader has clearly anticipated imperfection and has large goals for the school’s future. She continued:

I want us to be a model for the country for how we use, you know, this idea of like mind, body, spirit, wellness, and we leverage that to ensure that our students have access to an education that is game changing. I want us to be a model for other people to learn how it’s possible to work in an urban community with the demographics that we serve with all of the complexities of their lives, how we can do both. How you don’t have to choose academics over the whole child, but that academics is part of the whole child’s experience in school. (p.5)

There is still significant work to be done in having the staff continue to understand and accept imperfections as the school navigates another change. The feeling of uncertainty, of concern, and even sometimes of fear as I looked into my former staff’s eyes was obvious and physically palpable. The balance between the focuses on high expectations, pressure from external forces, and another new leader’s team has taken a clear toll on the culture of the team.

As a school leader in a new setting myself, this is a lesson of which I often need to be reminded, as the tempo of the daily school grind and expectation does not often lend itself to additional time for reflection and acceptance. However, accepting imperfections, and ensuring that as a leader this acceptance is equally transmitted to the teachers and staff as a natural part of the growth development and refinement of any school community, will be critical in the weeks and months ahead. In her reflection on the goodness in high schools, which she experienced, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) exclaimed, “In trying to press toward idealistic goals, there were always disappointments concerning the present realities,” (p. 309).

As this new school leader seeks to stabilize an environment with many strengths but with its heart-strings on the verge of rupture, she can seek guidance in these same words that were used by Lawrence-Lightfoot in 1983, “they believed that goodness was only possible if the imperfections were made visible and open for inspection” (p. 310). It is a huge challenge being transparent as a new leader in a new place surrounded by those with more experience and institutional knowledge. Confidence needs to be balanced with seeking information so that staff feel honored, supported, and growing. They need to know they have value. Their imperfections need to be approached in a positive and productive manner in turn increasing trust and ultimately rebounding school culture. Accepting imperfections will also have a positive effect on the feeling of the team, reinforce the responsiveness of leadership, and other enabling factors of collective efficacy.

Improving Collective Efficacy

“Turning attention to improving collective teacher efficacy would be advantageous based on its impressive list of positive consequences” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 13). Reflecting on the founding of Namaste, it was unconscious that I created the conditions in which collective teacher efficacy could be built, developed, and flourish. In the founding stages of Namaste, there was no “I.” It was frankly impossible to “stay in your lane” because there was so much to do all the time. Most of the work contained elements that not one person in the organization had ever encountered. Thus, we conquered them together. Floods, growing out of our space, not meeting different codes, getting per pupil allotments cut in the middle of the year, and much more were confronted not with an attitude of “why us” but with a perseverance that is hard to cultivate and even more challenging to re-create.

Today, however, there is considerable research on the phenomenon, and there is a clear and strong relationship between collective efficacy and six enabling conditions. As I have moved to lead a new school in a different system, I have used these as the foundation of my efforts to help lead student achievement to new heights. Parents, teachers, and students alike all referenced the “team” and “family” that was Namaste when they were at the school and in whatever setting they currently find themselves. Upon reflection, it was the absence of many of these enabling conditions for teacher collective efficacy that catapulted my interest in starting the school in the first place. For example, my frustration as a classroom teacher with little to no control or effect on the structures that I felt inhibited student success and learning is something I remember that enabled me to get through the toughest time in founding the school. And now I realize that these elements that were woven into the very fabric of Namaste since its inception have a name, an identity, and a face.

Donohoo (2017) articulated six enabling conditions for collective teacher efficacy as advanced teacher influence, goal consensus, teachers’ knowledge about each others’ work, cohesive staff, responsiveness of leadership, and effective systems of intervention. Each of these enabling conditions was part of Namaste’s original design from the interventionists outside of the classroom designed to remediate, or extend students when necessary to a clear and consistent system of learning walks, observation and sharing of our public teaching practice to the creation of “big goals” at the beginning of each year, and the constant monitoring of them throughout the year. As I looked at the struggles that Namaste has endured over the last 3 years, I can connect almost each one of the times of need to a lack of one of these enabling conditions. Therefore, it is clear that these enabling conditions are critical to any school leader hoping to have the extremely

large positive effect, the largest positive effect size ever recorded at 1.57 on student growth and success.

When I first heard it, collective efficacy felt like an amorphous term and a simple feeling that you got when entering places where people simply worked well together. However, it is clear that simple congeniality and a positive attitude do not have an effect on student achievement. It was more than that at Namaste. It was the relentless pursuit of excellence through having teachers that wanted to have influence over policies and procedures and engaging themselves in the creation and monitoring of goals rather than fear the use of data and craving the opportunity to learn every day from and with one-another that created a successful Namaste against all odds. These later defined tenants of *collective efficacy* as defined by Donohoo create a clear path for leaders attempting to chart a similar course. Since collective efficacy has numerous components, it is critical to put effort into developing each condition that enables collective efficacy over time.

Advanced teacher influence. “When teachers’ voices count in regard to designing curriculum, assessment, and professional learning, efficacy increases” (Donohoo, 2017 p. 29). While increasing teacher voice and assistance in design and implementation of school based activities does not cause collective efficacy to occur, it enables it or makes it more likely to occur. In this case, teachers feel valued, they increasingly commit to their school communities because they feel more powerful to make decisions.

This notion has clearly taken a toll as with continuing changing leadership, it is difficult to not only get teachers to commit to new leaders, but for leaders to find faith and energy in the teachers who remain loyal to the institution despite the ongoing transition. It is something to consider and reflect upon for any school leaders as communities of practice continue to grow and

develop. Surveys to measure how teachers' feel about their level of influence could be a start in getting an accurate depiction of teacher advanced influence. Continual attention should be paid to the topic given its connection with increasing student achievement.

Goal consensus. Much research has suggested that consensus on goals has a direct and significant influence on student achievement. Having clear and transparent goals is crucial, but ensuring communication on them is also clear, and transparency is even more critical. Goals also need to be framed in an actionable way for teachers and continually monitored throughout a year to provide both celebrations and continued areas of growth. I harken back to setting our "big goals" each year, which helped us both focus on a subgroup or subject that needed particular attention and provided a way for the staff to coalesce around the charter promises directly out of the charter proposal. It provided connection for the staff to the why behind our work and a connection to the past.

Each trimester at Namaste, we would spend professional development time connecting current data points to these "big goals" and the charter promises. It gave staff a goal that was meaningful and achievable. They were able to strategize with one another when the trajectory was not moving in the right direction. This is an area in which a new leader can have an immediate and direct influence. "Leaders can help build collective efficacy by communicating a strong belief in the capacity of the staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning and attain appropriately challenging goals throughout the goal setting process" (Donohoo, 2017, p. 31). Setting the targets and reinforcing the direction is an important step for any new school, new school leader, or new school year.

Teachers' knowledge about each other's work. Since teachers are all working simultaneously, it is often difficult for them to have direct experience in observing or

experiencing each other's work. Certainly, there are structures that can be put in place, many of which existed and some of which still exist at Namaste, like team meetings, vertical team meetings, sharing successful practices, and video-taping and watching videos together, which can provide a similar experience to actually seeing each other in action.

I remember one of the most powerful experiences we did at Namaste entitled "Follow a Student." We chose random students, put their names in a hat, and each teacher chose one. For one day, they followed that student throughout the day and experienced the entire day as a Namaste student. The reflections on this activity were astounding and positively affected teaching and learning at the school at a high level. The experiences of teachers who acted as students for a day, no matter in what classroom, were quite similar and provided an opportunity for teachers to have a shared experience and debrief it together to incite change in classrooms and across the school day. Using an opportunity like this, "can be empowering and motivating and would likely lead to increased collective efficacy" (Donohoo, 2017, p. 32).

Cohesive staff. "Change agents build cohesion by speaking in terms of the team and encouraging individual teachers to think like a team" (Dohonoo, 2017, p. 33). Finding ways for teachers and staff to be interdependent on one another and achieve a common purpose is an ongoing challenge for all school leaders, but especially for leaders with schools in transition. In the early years of Namaste, I often worked with staff to understand the discrepancy between collegiality and congeniality. It was nice for people to be cordial and accepting of one another and celebrate life's events together, but the real work of a school occurred with a creation and appreciation of successful collaborations. Finding ways to build these opportunities for the cohesion of staff will be critical to the ongoing growth and commitment to Namaste's mission over time.

Leadership. As one of her enabling conditions for collective efficacy, Donohoo (2017) described responsiveness of leadership. The author stated, “Responsive leaders demonstrate an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and protect teachers from issues and influences that detract from their teaching time or focus” (p.33). It is clear from numerous studies that a leader has an enormous effect on the culture of a school and its resulting student achievement. As Deal and Peterson (1999) explained, “Deep, shared leadership builds strong and cohesive cultures” (p. 87).

When I began Namaste, I knew nothing about school leadership; however, I worked like a dog both day and night to learn and grow as an individual and also as a school leader. I roamed the halls at 6:00p.m., asked teachers about their days, and brainstormed how to reach struggling students or grade an assignment. I read in classrooms and led effective professional development. I responded to every crisis call and every call for help. I made my teachers available for teaching in a way that I had never experienced as a teacher. I let them choose how to spend the money that we had, even though it would never be enough. I allowed my teachers to focus on teaching and learning. Despite my lack of formal leadership training or experience as a leader previously, these seemingly ordinary tasks were actually a reflection of strong leadership. Strong leaders support and direct the resources in a school to most accurately and effectively influence student achievement in a positive way.

It is clear that the culture and community at Namaste has been most affected by the transition in leadership over the last 3 years. It is also clear that the research on collective efficacy provides the answers to which part of this leadership can offer lessons to the new stable leader in place now. “When teachers are entrusted with the responsibility to make important

decisions, they not only form a strong sense of collective efficacy, but they also feel empowered as well” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 29).

With leadership transitioning so frequently at Namaste, it has been impossible for teachers to feel empowered or to have decision-making power in many instances. It takes some time for a leader to get “settled in,” and often there is a tendency to want to “learn the ropes” before engaging teachers in decision-making, especially because the leader did not have a full understanding of the school and the community. However, it is clear that ensuring teachers’ voices count and that they feel like they count, increases collective efficacy and the effectiveness of the school leader overall. The other part of leadership enabling collective efficacy that is challenging for new leaders is that according to Donohoo (2017), “responsiveness requires awareness of situations—the details and undercurrents in the school” (p. 33). The challenge this entails multiplies when there is a new leader to the building learning and getting acclimated to a new way of being.

As a new leader and a new leader to Namaste, N.N. has the great challenge ahead of her of figuring out how to blend the founding with the current, identifying what should be changed, and what remains a sacred part of the institution’s identity. However, it is clear that her aligned system of values and the school’s ongoing successful practices will enable her to take some time to build and rebuild systems and procedures that may have eroded over time at the school. Donohoo (2017) said, “When formal leaders provide opportunities for shared leadership by affording others the power to make decisions, everyone benefits” (p. 40).

It has been difficult to share decision-making power when the person with whom it is to be shared has rotated multiple times. And, it is more efficient for a new leader to simply take stock and make decisions. Empowering teachers in this manner requires “risk taking and a strong

belief in empowerment over efficiency, choice over decisiveness, and autonomy over control,” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 40). It also requires excessive patience, which is why it is so difficult to attain.

Many years ago, when the second wave of teachers became entrenched in the “Namaste Way,” there was a sense of disconnect between two groups of teachers—those who founded the school and those who came in years 4-7, the elementary years of the school. At that time, although I felt as though teachers were involved in decision-making and empowered, not all teachers agreed with this sentiment. Teachers in the elementary experience group expressed feelings of alienation based on the fact that they perceived themselves to be less empowered. As we discussed these feelings, we came up with the idea of creating a Principal’s Advisory Committee (PAC).

The PAC had members from multiple staff stakeholder domains and experience levels and connected with the school leader once a month to review the state of the school on multiple levels. The feedback provided by this group was not easy to hear or digest, as a fractured school community was one of the driving factors behind actually starting a school in the first place. However, it was clear at that time that teacher engagement in decision making felt like tokenism. It took a significant amount of deliberate effort and abandoning my own ego to move first to consulting and informing the PAC on issues relating to school functioning and overall culture and second to teacher initiated decision making then shared by administrators. This experience could be a model to look at replicating or adjusting in Namaste’s current fractured state. Increasing this teacher engagement and meaningful collaboration around decision-making will increase overall collective efficacy, thereby ultimately increasing student achievement.

Nonetheless, empowering teachers and creating meaningful opportunities for collaboration with them cannot increase collective efficacy without a strong and effective school leader. This has clearly been the downfall of the attempt to continue to increase collective efficacy in the founder transition. However, with a new, talented, and strong leader in place, it is clear that leadership should no longer be a barrier. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983):

The literature on effective schools tends to agree on at least one point—that an essential ingredient of good schools is strong, consistent, and inspired leadership. The tone and culture of schools is said to be defined by the vision and purposeful action of the principal. (p. 323).

Effective systems of intervention. At the founding of Namaste, creating a system where teachers collaborated to ensure that all students were provided both with access to grade level targets and expectations and with instruction that filled many of the gaps with which they came to school was critical in creating a program where students would aspire to achieve at higher levels. Multiple teachers in classrooms allowed teachers to utilize each staff member's unique abilities to meet the needs of students. As the years progressed and budgets became tighter, multiple teachers were removed from most classrooms but replaced with the notion of an intervention team who would service a subset of students to give them the "push" they needed to reach mastery at grade level. "Effective systems of interventions help ensure that all students are successful" (Donohoo, 2017 p. 34).

During my observations at Namaste, I saw some evidence that this practice still exists. To build the most collective efficacy possible, it is recommended that the system of intervention is continually revisited and clear to faculty and students in order to build both self and collective efficacy in staff and students.

Partnering with Families and the Community

Increasing student achievement is not a one-teacher job, nor a one-grade level job, nor a one-school job. It is critical that schools work together across the educational spectrum and engage families from the beginning in order to make a difference in educational achievement over a lifetime. Building these relationships with families and within the community helps create support structures for students that transcend a specific time period or location in their lives. Namaste had great value for parents in their knowledge and in ensuring that teachers create a positive and productive relationship with them. As parent, J.T. stated, “Over here, you open the doors for everyone, all they have to do is just sign in and direct to the classroom that they need to be” (p. 2).

The opportunities for parent engagement at Namaste are endless. But what is more crucial and what can be a lesson for other schools and leaders is how to embrace parents in the learning process. As the initial founder, I created many opportunities for parents to both participate in the learning process and to share their learning with the school, the staff, and other families. Additionally, we created opportunities that allowed students to demonstrate their own learning thereby engaging families in experiencing first hand the development of their child. Teachers and parents alike reference these opportunities as cherished memories, times that brought their families together for conversation, and connection in ways that they never had previously. Several parents and teachers remembered Friday Family Breakfast where a simple 30-minute activity helped transcend the typical awkward dialogue that often exists between parents and teachers. The structures that were set in place created symbols, habits, and rituals all based on the ideology that parents and community are a critical lever to overall growth and achievement of all students.

In thinking about transference of this lesson, it is crucial to not think specifically about replication of these practices, rituals, and symbols. In fact, schools and leaders should reflect on the need in their communities and the values that drive the community toward success. For example, in my last few years at Namaste as we shared our learning through a federally funded learning institute entitled *Learning the Namaste Way*, I aided schools across the country in thinking through the elements of a true family/school partnership. Too often these activities are separate and not integrated into the fabric of the school and do not create ongoing opportunities for connection among families, the community, and the students. As I worked with different communities, we would use the pillars of the Friday Family Breakfast program to design programs modeled with the same goals and direction of the program, but holding that communities unique needs at the forefront. For example, in a largely African American, church-going community, we created Sunday Brunches, where once a month, families got together inside the school for a meal, conversation and a short student performance or demonstration.

There are countless other examples at Namaste and beyond of the value of the home-school connection and its influence on student learning and achievement over time and in life. Even Hattie (2012) explained an effect size that ranges between 0.3 and 0.6, and even higher for schools where they put the co-learning of parents on par with the education of the students. He said:

Teaching parents the language of learning led to enhanced engagement by students in their schooling experiences, improvements in reading achievement, greater skills and jobs for the parents, and higher expectations, higher satisfaction and higher endorsement of the local schools and the community. (p. 188).

Thus, it is clear that to meet its vision of changing the trajectory of underserved children's lives, Namaste will need to continue to value the development of the home-school connection.

Navigating Leadership Transition

In my time visiting Namaste as an outsider, I felt both proud and disappointed, full of honor and concern. Parents, teachers, and the new school leader identified a whole host of promising practices that in reflection and in research truly have helped the school attain great success over time. However, it was also clear to me that over the past 3 years, the foundation of Namaste has been shaken, run-down, and in some situations and circumstances, lost. The very trust, supportive and active culture, and engagement of all stakeholders has eroded due to significant and ongoing transition.

Over the past 3 years, while all of this data has been collected, Namaste has had three leadership transitions. Many founding teachers and staff members have moved on but others remain. The commitment of the new school leader's approach to "getting back to the core" of Namaste is a shining light for some, but another concern for others. It is clear that the potential is great for this new school leader, but the role of these defining, founding attributes will be crucial to defining the next stage of Namaste—be it success, or failure. It is my hope that some of the lessons, stories, and research contained herein will help the entire community rebound and be able to help take the school to new heights, especially by focusing on the research base of many of the original strategies implemented rather than simple intuition.

Significance of the Work

This portrait provides the ability to look inside an organization after more than a decade of operation and look for the successes and lessons that can be gleaned from a series of conversations with multiple stakeholders combined with observational analysis. The catalyst for

the creation of Namaste was teacher struggle. It is clear that there are some universal lessons that can be gleaned from this inquiry and discussed throughout this paper and particularly in this chapter to inform school leaders of all kinds, especially in start-up schools. It should also help provide a path forward as the political environment promotes a variety of school options and a market based approach to the survival of schools.

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APPENDIX A



Mission: Namaste Charter School promotes lifelong student success and a love of learning by implementing and sharing a groundbreaking educational model that combines health and wellness with academic rigor in a peaceful environment.

At the classroom level, teachers are held accountable to implementation of Namaste's mission and vision through demonstration of the six pillars throughout the classroom and school environment. Namaste's six pillars of instruction are:

Teaching and Learning Pillars

- Balanced Learning
- Language and Culture
- Collaborative Practice

Healthy Lifestyles Pillars

- Nutrition, Health and Wellness
- Peaceful School Culture
- Movement

All staff members are expected to believe in and demonstrate the six pillars throughout their work at Namaste Charter School. Following are one sentence statements and the 6 Essential Implementation Strategies for each of the pillars.

- The *balanced learning pillar* aims to create a learning environment that values all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy across the curriculum for our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Develop essential questions with unit plans.

- The language and culture pillar aims to create a learning environment that increases knowledge, respect, and appreciation for the languages and cultures of the world for our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Confront racism and cultural intolerance and cultivate acceptance through class meeting/Advisory/homeroom.

- The collaborative practice pillar aims to create a learning environment that maximizes partnership amongst our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Invite other teachers into classrooms to observe teaching.

- The nutrition, health, and wellness pillar aims to create a learning environment that cultivates exercise, eating right, and taking care of mind as components of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Provide opportunities for students to express their feelings.

- The peaceful school culture pillar aims to create a learning environment that promotes safety, respect, open dialogue, and nonviolent conflict resolution for our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Use logical consequences.

- The movement pillar aims to create a learning environment that incorporates movement into academic instruction to stimulate an alert and active body and mind for our community.

Essential Implementation Strategy: Use movement in a strategic way.

APPENDIX B**Questions for Founding Faculty/Student/Family Interviews**

Narrative-focused interviews are distinct from run-of-the-mill, semi-structured qualitative interviewing strategies, where even the favored 'open-ended question' can act to suppress – and even eradicate – the impulse and opportunity for storytelling, (Golsteijn and Wright, 2013)

1. Can you tell me about how you first became part of Namaste Charter School?
2. What attracted you to the school? Why?
3. Tell me about your selection of Namaste (as a student, parent or teacher). Why did you come to (work or attend)?
4. Compare Namaste to other schools in which you were a student, teacher or parent. How did they look different or the same? Sound different or the same? {probe here on other senses}
5. What did you notice after you finished your first year as a (teacher, student or parent)?
6. How did this feeling change or grow after your first 5 years with the school? Your first 10?
7. What do you remember about the community in the beginning? Through the years? At specific milestones?
8. Can you tell me how you grew, changed or developed through your years at Namaste?

The attached modified Responsive Classroom© Observation Checklist Form (Appendix C) will also be used to record observations in categories, rather than an actual formal checklist.

APPENDIX C

Responsive Classroom © Walk-Through

Teacher: _____ Date: _____ Grade: _____

Look For Element: Student Behavior	Notes
All/Almost all students are on task, calm, and using soft or medium voices	
All/Almost all students respectfully interact with classmates (e.g., using friendly faces and language, sharing ideas, helping each other, working with classmates of both genders and different races)	
Look for Element: Classroom Management and Teacher Language	Notes
Students are engaged in interesting and meaningful work. The lessons and activities are active and interactive.	
Three to five classroom rules are posted and stated positively, rather than negatively	
Morning Meeting rules are posted at eye level near meeting space	
Teacher speaks to students using a calm and respectful voice	
Teacher uses predictable signal to gain student attention	
Teacher waits until all students are quiet and paying attention before speaking	
Teacher uses reinforcing language rather than general praise to specifically and descriptively name positive behaviors of individuals, groups and/or whole class.	
Teacher interactively models and/or provides clear directions, expectations and reminders to support student learning and prevent student misbehavior	
Teacher responds respectfully and consistently to misbehavior	

Look for Element: Classroom Organization	Notes
Classroom is clean, organized and free of clutter	
Desk/table arrangement allows ample space for a morning meeting circle and there is evidence that the space is used throughout the day	
Children’s hopes and dreams are displayed attractively in the classroom and reflect meaningful learning goals	
Teacher has established a pre-designated time-out place that is out of the way but visible to the teacher.	
Wall displays and decorations are mostly student work or teacher made	