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# To Plant A Garden Is To Believe In The Future: An Autoethnographic Journey Of Doubt And Restoration In A Co-Principalship

Arturo Abrego

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TO PLANT A GARDEN IS TO BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY OF DOUBT AND  
RESTORATION IN A CO-PRINCIPALSHIP

Arturo Abrego

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Doctor of Education  
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

June, 2019

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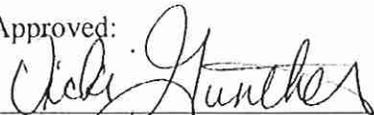
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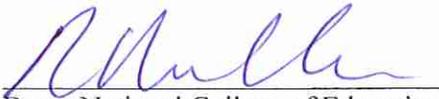
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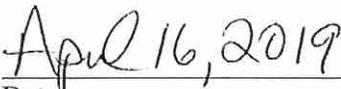
  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This autoethnographic research study explored the circumstances and challenges I encountered as an educational leader during the inception of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. Through the use of autoethnographic vignettes, I provided an intimate account of the circumstances and conditions that led my school district to establish a co-principal leadership structure. The use of autoethnographic vignettes was not only a vehicle to tell my story but also served as an avenue for the reader to connect, conceptualize, and contextualize the circumstances and outcomes associated with this personal journey. Specifically, the stories and responses within this research are intended to demonstrate the power of self-reflection in the overall professional and personal development of an educational leader. It is a journey into the past that lives within me every day, a journey that I have lived once and need to live again, a journey of discovery, reflection, and hopefully, one of growth.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I hold deep gratitude to Dr. Vicki Gunther for her guidance, support, and patience. Her constant encouragement and expertise provided the foundation for my success in this endeavor. She is a wonderful person and trusted colleague.

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderfully supportive wife, children, and family  
and is written in loving memory of my parents.

My parents sacrificed everything for their children, and those sacrifices will be felt for  
generations—*gracias por todo y para todo que vamos a tener.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders.*  
(Faulkner, 1936, p. 111)

My parents immigrated to this country from Mexico and left their culture and language to pursue a better life for their children. My parents and my older siblings arrived in this country over 60 years ago. They emphasized the use of Spanish at home and refused to speak English so that we would maintain our language and culture. My family settled in Chicago's Humboldt Park area; they were the first Hispanic family to move into the neighborhood. I was born in this country in 1962, and by the time I entered kindergarten, our school was beginning to reflect the linguistic and ethnic diversity of our newly adopted country.

I have nine brothers and sisters, and the first home my parents rented had four bedrooms and one bathroom. I attended the local public school for five years. The school was as diverse as our neighborhood, and the classes were as crowded as one of the bedrooms in our home. Although the accommodations in this rented house surpassed the dirt floor shack that my parents once owned in Mexico, my father's only goal was to save money to buy a home that would meet the needs of our large family. He worked, saved, and by 1972, he purchased our first home. Unfortunately, the location of the house was outside of the attendance area of my previous school.

The school attendance area for this new house placed us within the boundaries of a public school that had a history of gang violence. The reputation of the school

concerned my parents, and they decided to send us to a private Catholic school where the vast majority of last names were predominately different from mine. This same pattern of unfamiliar names continued within my educational career in high school, college, and graduate school.

I am a first-generation Hispanic male. I am a first-generation bilingual and bicultural male who has typically been the only Hispanic in a classroom. My culture, ethnicity, and home language were absent in the schools I attended. I did not recognize myself in the faces of the educators who were in my schools. I am a first-generation Hispanic male pursuing a doctorate who has never had a Hispanic teacher in his entire educational career. I had a desire to become an educator—this desire centered on honoring the sacrifices that my parents made for my family.

I have now been an educator for over 25 years. For 10 years, I served as a speech and language pathologist. The remaining 15 years have been in administrative roles within various school districts. I have served as an assistant principal, principal, curriculum coordinator, special education coordinator, assistant superintendent, and director of bilingual programs.

As a first-generation Hispanic educator, I have embraced each of my roles as an educator through my own personal and cultural perspective. While at times my culture, my language, and my experiences have been a benefit to me and to the districts that I have served, they have also fostered and posed some direct challenges that have impacted me personally and professionally. Of all the roles that I have embraced, it was in the role of building principal that the benefits and challenges of my biculturalism have made the most significant impact on my educational beliefs, values, and commitments.

## **Context of the Study**

The role of a building principal or the configuration of a team consisting of a building principal and assistant principal have been the leadership structures that have traditionally been in place within the American school system. Historically, when there is a leadership team composed of a principal and assistant principal within a building, the constructs of educational leadership, curricular leadership, and instructional leadership are embodied in the responsibilities traditionally associated with the principal. The managerial issues within the building, those associated with bus routes, class scheduling, and discipline have been typically assigned by the building principal to the assistant principal (Austin, 1972; Fullan, 2018; Glanz, 1994; Glatthorn, Jailall, & Jailall, 2016; Koru, 1993; van Eman, 1926). There is a hierarchy of responsibility and delineated roles and responsibilities encompassed within each of these respective positions (Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, & Warren, 2015; Oliver, 2005).

The continuous growth and complexities of schools throughout the years have directly impacted the roles and responsibilities of school principals. Principals have been continuously confronted with newly developed policies to implement, educational reforms, and additional duties (Oliver, 2005). School principals over the last two decades have been required to address issues relating anywhere from obesity, drug awareness, and character education to academic growth and achievement across the spectrum of disciplines. Situations relating to school safety have also prompted principals to incorporate and practice lockdown drills and bomb evacuations in addition to the traditional safety measures of tornado and fire drills.

However, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 dramatically reshaped the concept of the principal as the instructional leader. The responsibilities associated with this federal mandate heightened the pressures to enhance instruction, develop assessment initiatives, and tailor professional development (PD) activities to focus on discrete skill development. Principals were expected to create school improvement plans designed to outline the expected growth for all students. Principals were expected to develop collaborative relationships with parents, teachers, students, local community members, and businesses. These collaborative partnerships were designed to foster a sense of collective responsibility in developing goals and realizing visions (Barth, 2002; Donaldson, 2006; Glatthorn et al., 2016).

In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act centered on accountability. Responsibility for student growth within schools is now ultimately the most significant role of the principal (Beck & Murphy, 1992; Conley, 2003; Copeland, 2001; Fullan, 2018; Francis et al., 2016; Marzano, Walters, & McNulty, 2005; Osborne & Wiggins, 1989). The increasing demands for accountability in the office of the school principal have prompted some school districts to consider a shared leadership team model, a co-principalship, and to abandon the traditional leadership structure of principal and assistant principal (Eckman, 2018; Masters, 2013a).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to articulate a personalized account of the co-principal leadership model. My experience in the co-principal model was forensically and critically examined to identify the strengths, challenges, benefits, and repercussions associated with this leadership model. In my research, I present an intimate portrait of my

experiences that I believe provides educators, administrators, and leaders with a method to formulate a deep understanding of this co-principalship leadership structure.

Additionally, I believe the accounts detailed within this research study can be utilized as a reflective as well as a transparent window through which individuals can gauge their respective journeys of leadership and the leadership of others.

### **Research Questions**

The specific questions that guided this research study are:

- How do culture, ethnicity and gender impact an educational leader, particularly within the configuration of the co-principalship?
- What were the circumstances that prompted our school district to pursue this leadership structure?
- What were the fundamental leadership challenges I experienced in the role of a co-principalship?
- How were responsibilities delineated and distributed within this structure?  
How were decisions made within this structure and how were conflicts resolved?
- How were relationships with the parents and teachers of our school established and maintained within this leadership structure?
- How did this experience facilitate my development of characteristics associated with effective leadership?
- What are the primary planning, implementation, and monitoring recommendations for school districts to consider when implementing this leadership structure?

## **Autoethnography**

Within this study, I outlined the circumstances and conditions that prompted the structural change in leadership in my school district. I provided prospective readers with a personal account of the issues associated with the formation and implementation of a co-principal leadership model within a school. A fundamental change in the traditional leadership structure embodies the concept of the co-principal leadership team. This study reviewed the personal and professional experiences that prompted the development of a co-principal leadership structure within my school district, and it highlighted my experiences within this leadership structure.

I utilized an autoethnographic framework to discuss my experiences within this leadership structure. Hayano (1979) cited the use of autoethnography in anthropological studies that focused research on one's own culture to understand society and self. Autoethnographic writings are autobiographical and focus on the researcher's lived experience as a topic of investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). The writer is intimately involved in the observation and analysis of the study. These are highly personalized accounts of events that assist the researcher in gaining a better understanding of a particular school of thought or practice. Autoethnographic writings include aspects of personalities, family history, relationships within the field and our narratives about workplaces, disciplines, family friends, and self. Chang (2008) concluded that the fundamental underpinnings of autoethnographic research methodology center on four assumptions:

1. Culture is a group-oriented concept connected to self and others.

2. The reading and writing of self-narratives provide a window through which self and others can be examined and understood.
3. Telling one's story does not automatically result in a cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation.
4. Autoethnography is an excellent tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners to gain a profound understanding of self and others. (p. 13)

My mother loved to tell us stories. Her stories were elaborate, funny, and thought-provoking. Her stories had a purpose and provided the foundation for us to consider her life and what we wanted from our lives. They were designed to make us think, reflect, and realize that our lives were significant. I loved her stories. Stories are potent messages intended to teach and share experiences. Within this research design, I utilized vignettes not only to tell my story but also as a means for the reader to connect, conceptualize, and contextualize the circumstances and outcomes associated with this personal journey.

Hughes and Huby (2012) identified vignettes as text and images that elicit responses and reflection from the writer and readers. Vignettes are stories and scenarios based on real-life situations (Puzanova & Tertyshnikova, 2017). These stories provide a snapshot designed to allow a reader a view into an experience. Azman and Mahadhir (2017) indicated that vignettes are short stories that elicit responses that reveal values, perceptions, and impressions.

The use of autoethnographic vignettes facilitates the author's ability to reflect and provide an avenue for the audience to connect and reflect upon their circumstances. This ability for connection and self-reflection leads readers to understand the writer's lived

experience. The ability to understand the lived experience of another person facilitates the ability to understand oneself and others. Reed-Danahay (1997) defined autoethnography as

a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text [and] can be done by either an anthropologist who is doing "home" or "native" ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer. It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within the social context in which it occurs. (p. 9)

The stories within this research study provided a snapshot of my lived experience as a first-generation, Hispanic male, building principal in a co-principal leadership structure. They were intended to demonstrate the power of self-reflection in the overall professional and personal development of an educational leader. The foci of this research were the issues I confronted in my professional life that impacted my leadership style within the educational field. I do not doubt that the situations that I described reinforce and reflect the values and beliefs that I hold.

Conversely, I knew that using this autoethnographic, methodological, investigative measure that is dependent on self-reflection would reveal professional issues that questioned and challenged some preexisting values and images that I had about education and the educational system as a whole. I recognized that within this autoethnographic research study, I would perhaps reveal some personal characteristics that might also challenge some of my preexisting values and beliefs.

The purpose of this research study was to present my story within this leadership model and explain how issues of fear, hesitation, and consistent self-doubt led to critical reflection and self-discovery. Within the context of this study, I described the circumstances and choices that I made to solidified my leadership abilities through

personal and professional growth. Additionally, by examining these issues within the context of this study, readers would be able to recognize themselves or at least recognize an avenue for discussion with others about educational leadership. It is a journey into the past that lives within me every day, a journey that I have lived once and need to live again, a journey of discovery, reflection, and hopefully, one of growth.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews research literature that pertains to the role of the principal and leadership structures within schools. It provides a brief overview of the evolving roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the school principal, with an emphasis on those responsibilities relating to school management and instructional leadership.

Additionally, this chapter highlights how the increased complexities of managing and leading schools are juxtaposed with the increased demands that currently confront principals. The review also briefly examines how these increasing demands on the office of the school principal have prompted some school districts to consider different types of shared leadership configurations and approaches. Finally, this literature review briefly exams the impact of how my cultural and familial experiences as a Hispanic male impacted my experience as a school principal.

There are a variety of shared leadership structures that have been explored and implemented within educational systems. My study focused specifically on the co-principal leadership team model. The co-principalship was reviewed and examined regarding the variety of configurations which may appear within this leadership framework and the essential features that contribute to successful implementation of this leadership structure within school districts.

I provide readers with a personal account of the formation and implementation of a co-principal model. I explore how my culture, as well as the school culture, impacted my leadership within this structure. Subsequently, I outlined the essential components

and features of an autoethnographic study and specifically highlighted the power of self-reflection in the overall professional and personal development of an educational leader.

### **The Role of the Principal: A Historical Overview**

The building principal or a team consisting of a building principal and assistant principal has been the traditional leadership structure within the American school system since the early 20th century (Glanz, 2004). The role of the school principal in America initially was conceived in the Massachusetts Law of 1647. This law stipulated that the construction of elementary schools should occur when 50 or more families are living within a town (Pellicer, 1981). Typically, within this era, schools that required the use of more than one teacher usually assigned one of the instructors as headmaster, preceptor, or principal teacher (Pierce, 1935). Teaching principals were appointed to oversee the opening and closing of schools and other administrative tasks. However, the majority of their responsibilities were focused on teaching students (Grady, 1990).

The typical responsibilities associated with the elementary school principal focused on administrative tasks and instructional supervision. In an article entitled *The Managerial Duties of the Principal*, Fillers (1923), who served as a superintendent of schools in Texas, reflected on the impact of time spent on administrative tasks:

Generally, the prominent part of the principal's time is taken up with clerical duties relating to the general control of the school, while supervision, which is ranked as of first importance, receives in actual practice only a small fraction of the total days' time. This condition creates a real problem for the administration. The need for leadership of the principal cannot be gainsaid, yet the general character of the work with what he busies himself interferes with his leadership and restricts his usefulness. (p. 48)

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, as cities grew and larger schools developed, the responsibilities of the principal shifted from teaching to performing more

administrative tasks (Grady, 1990; Pellicer, 1981; Pierce 1935; Osborne & Wiggins, 1989). Specific duties focused on developing class schedules, grouping students, and grade promotions (Grady, 1990).

The continuous struggle to maintain the balance between administrative duties and instructional leadership within the role of principalship is documented throughout the decades within the educational literature (Beck & Murphy, 1992; Benson, 1926; Cubberley, 1923; Fillers, 1923; Jacobson & Reavis, 1941; McClure, 1921; McKee, 1948; Pellicer, 1981; Reavis, Pierce, & Stulken, 1932; Sergiovanni, 1984; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

In the 1930s, the establishment of a new role within the administrative structure was configured with the advent of the "general supervisor" who became the primary assistant to the principal. The responsibilities associated with this newly formed administrative position focused on routine clerical tasks, custodial duties, and school discipline (Glanz, 2004). Presently, the majority of the functions performed by assistant principals are still administrative in nature and address issues associated with bus routes, class scheduling, and discipline (Austin, 1972; Glanz, 1994; Koru, 1993). Although assistant principals play a significant part in the structures and operations of schools, historically there is a hierarchy of responsibility and differentiated functions between the roles of the principal and assistant principal.

The continuous growth and complexities of schools throughout the years have impacted the roles and responsibilities of school principals. Principals are continuously confronted with newly developed policies to implement, educational reforms, and additional duties (Oliver, 2005). School principals over the last two decades have been

required to address issues related to, obesity, drug awareness, gender identification, and character education. Concerns related to school safety have prompted school systems to incorporate lockdown drills, bomb evacuations, along with the traditional safety measures of tornado and fire drills. In some instances, there have been discussions of arming school personnel to address the ongoing struggle with gun violence (Weiler & Armenta, 2014). Issues addressed within our public-school system are as complex as the society that we live within. *The Condition of Education 2017* is an annual document that is mandated by the U.S. Congress. The report was intended to provide an intimate perspective regarding the state of education within our country. Specifically, the report highlights the following issues:

- Public school enrollment is expected to approach about 50.3 million students.
- Minority students make up over fifty-percent of public-school enrollment.
- Ten-percent of school-age students speak a language other than English at home.
- In school year 2014–15, nearly half of Hispanic and Black public school students, attended high-poverty schools. In contrast, eight-percent of White students attended high-poverty schools.
- Drop-out rates for Blacks and Hispanics remain higher than White students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017, pp. xxv–xxvii).

According to this mandated report, there are persistent challenges in educating a growing and increasingly diverse school population. These challenges and issues are juxtaposed with the ever-increasing pressures that were initiated with the high stakes standardized test associated with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and recalibrated

with the reauthorization through Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that outlined policies and practices embedded within the legislation focused on eliminating the achievement gap that exists between groups of students.

NCLB, enacted in 2002, reshaped the concept of the principal as the instructional leader. The responsibilities associated with this federal mandate heightened the pressures to enhance instruction, develop assessment initiatives, tailor professional development activities, and staff recruitment. The reauthorization of NCLB through ESSA signaled the continued expectation that school principals are instructional leaders. Principals are expected to develop school improvement plans designed to outline expected growth expectations for all students. Principals are also responsible for developing collaborative relationships with parents, teachers, students, local community members, and businesses. These collaborative partnerships are designed to foster a sense of collective responsibility in developing goals and vision (Barth, 2002; Donaldson, 2006). However, accountability for student growth within schools is ultimately the responsibility of the principal. (Beck & Murphy, 1992; Conley, 2003; Copeland, 2001; Marzano et al., 2005; Osborne & Wiggins, 1989). Accountability is embedded throughout the policies associated with NCLB and the ESSA (Guifoyle, 2006). Although the role of the federal government within the ESSA is significantly different than under NCLB, individual schools are still identified with the performance designations that focus on identifying underperforming schools in need of repair.

The accountability measures within federal and state mandates and their utilization of sanctions on schools increased the pressures associated with the office of the principal (Hursh, 2007). Principals are expected to be visionary leaders, curricular

and instructional experts, as well as assessment specialists. Additionally, there is an expectation that building principals be educational leaders accountable for student growth (Balfanz et al., 2007).

There is no doubt that the importance of school principals has always been a vital factor in schools. However, the roles and responsibilities associated with the office of the principal have changed dramatically over the years. The ever-expanding demographic diversity within schools, coupled with the increased pressure for student accountability, and the ever-growing need to balance the administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership have many educational experts believing that these expectations are excessive for one person to address alone (Court, 2004; Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005).

### **Collective Leadership**

The term principal leadership creates a variety of images for different people. Historically associated with a sole individual who manages and leads the organization, the building principal serves as the essential leader within schools—an alternative and growing concept center on collective leadership. Collective leadership is a generalized term for shared responsibility either through distributed leadership or a shared leadership model (Döös, Wilhelmson, Madestam, & Ornberg, 2017). Within a distributed model, responsibilities and decision making is shared between those who are not in management or administrative positions and those who are directly seated in management roles (Jones, 2014). The focus of this study is on shared leadership between those individuals in management positions. Specifically, I focused on shared leadership within the office of the principal.

## Co-Principalships

The increasing demands placed upon the office of the school principal by federal legislation, state legislation, and the community have prompted some school districts to consider a co-principal leadership team model. The concept of the co-principalship was initially discussed within the educational field in America over 30 years ago (Eckman, 2006).

Court (2003) explained how the leadership structure within the co-principalship can vary:

- **Supported Dual Leadership:** Two principals share some leadership duties and divide other responsibilities according to their strengths. They delegate additional tasks to other staff members.
- **Job-Share Co-Principalship:** Two people alternate working part time together to fulfill the obligations of the principalship.
- **Split Task Dual Leadership:** Both co-principals work together full time to address the responsibilities of the office of the principal. One of the principals approaches the administrative tasks of the office, and the other addresses the issues associated with instructional leadership.
- **Integrative Co-Principalship:** The distribution of all work is flexible, with no predetermined roles. Each professional incorporates equal responsibility for administrative and instructional leadership task. (p. 162)

There are a variety of partnerships that a school district can develop regarding the co-principalship model that will enable the district to distribute administrative and instructional duties and responsibilities between two people. This sharing of

responsibilities is one of the reasons that school districts implement this leadership structure. Additional circumstances that prompt school districts to explore this option is to recruit new leaders to the field, to enrich the experience of the principalship, to build leadership capacity within schools and “grow their own,” to plan for transitions within schools and to attract new professionals to the office of the principalship (Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

Many articles have outlined the issues with job satisfaction and the difficulties that school principals have in maintaining a professional and personal balance within their lives (e.g., Fenwick & Pierce, 2000; Potter, 2001; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012; Wang, Pollock, & Hauseman, 2018). The challenges associated with personal obligations and professional responsibilities within the role of the principalship have caused some of these school leaders to vacate the office. The availability of an equal partner to discuss issues and to problem solve challenges has reduced the stress levels on educational leaders and has often had a positive impact on their performance (Brown & Feltham, 1997; Chirichello, 2003; Eckman, 2006).

The general premise of a co-principal leadership structure centers on the tenet that the development of an equal partnership with another professional can provide each of these individuals with personal and professional benefits. An extensive study by Eckman (2006) focused on the personal and professional benefits associated with leadership teams composed of a co-principalship model and surveyed a total of 106 co-principal teams in a number of areas and defined them:

- role conflict is the degree of conflict that individuals had concerning their professional lives compared to their personal lives;

- role commitment is an area designed to differentiate how leaders set priorities for work and their respective relationships;
- job satisfaction focused on job satisfaction in the areas of work relations, career opportunities, and school characteristics.

Results showed that the co-principal teams within Eckman's study were able to efficiently balance the responsibilities of their professional lives with the commitments within their personal lives. The survey results from within Eckman's study indicated that providing additional support in the form of a co-principal leadership model was beneficial in addressing the demands associated with the principalship and indicated a high level of job satisfaction associated with this leadership configuration (Chirichello, 2003; Eckman, 2006; Paterson, 2006; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

The essential elements of the success of this model center on equal partnerships and a team approach to addressing issues. Court (2004) conducted a qualitative case study of a co-principal team consisting of three professional teams and outlined some essential characteristics that facilitated the development of an efficient and positive leadership team. Specifically, the study indicated that open and honest communication promoted the ability of these respective principalship leadership teams to establish meaningful relationships with all of their constituents. Court (2004) also noted that these effective co-principal leadership teams also

- participated in reflective practice,
- talked to each other and debated ideas,
- respected a difference of opinions. and
- constructive conflict was seen as productive.

The aspects of communication, collaboration, collegiality, mutual respect, modeling, flexibility, adaptability, shared values/beliefs, and mutual accountability are the positive, personal characteristics, and professional decorum that have defined successful leadership teams within a co-principals' structure (Court, 2004; Di Stefano, 2002; Doyle & Meyers, 1999; Eckman, 2006; Glogowski & Austin, 2007; Gronn, 1999; Gronn & Hamilton, 2004; Lacey, 2006; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006). The essential aspect of listening plays a crucial role in successful leadership teams within the co-principals structure (Döös et al., 2017; Safir, 2017).

### **Challenges of the Co-Principalship**

There are additional challenges when two individuals occupy the office of the principal that can arise and restrict their effectiveness. One issue centers on how the community perceives professionals in these positions. If communication systems are not transparent and followed by both principals, stakeholders can become confused about roles and responsibilities and begin to distrust the partnership. Solidifying the co-principalship collaboration entails establishing relationships with parents, students, faculty, and other administrators. Difficulties associated with clear communication can have a negative impact on the legitimacy of the leadership team and their respective ability to forge relationships with valued and essential members within their community.

Cohesive, consistent communication delivered in concert from within the co-principal leadership team establishes the foundation that will enable the team to develop a vision for the school-based shared values and beliefs with all its community members (Court, 2004; Döös et al., 2017; Eckman, 2006). Additionally, the equitable distribution of responsibilities within this leadership construct can also have an impact on its

effectiveness. The division of duties, based solely on administrative and instructional responsibilities, can give the impression that one of the principals has greater authority (Eckman, 2006). This impression that one individual has the higher power or is "truly in-charge" can adversely impact staff relationships, parental confidence, and create a division within the learning community (Ekman, 2006; Lacey, 2006, Thomson & Blackmore, 2006). This perception, of one person having more prominent authority than the other, can also impact the professional and personal relationship between the co-principals. This situation could lead to the perception that one of the co-leaders is the subordinate or the assistant principal to the other which could lead to disagreements and isolation and could interfere with overall stability within the role (Eckman, 2006).

The ability of each of the individuals within this leadership structure to value one another as professionals is fundamental for the development of a successful partnership. An important concept within the co-principalship model centers on the idea of equal partnership. Affiliations and alliances that were determined to be free from "ego" were successful (Döös et al., 2017; Eckman, 2006). This conceptual framework reflects the values associated with the ideas of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Hagstrom, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1984). The foundation of servant leadership centers on the idea that all decisions meet the needs of others before one's self (Greenleaf, 1991). It involves the elimination and redirections of the ego (Buchen, 1998). Tate (1998) proposed that there is "no mission is more important than for leaders to empower" principle-centered leadership requires "leaders to evaluate their performance, values, and needs in a context focused on others" (p. 38). This process of self-evaluation and self-awareness is essential to the development and refinement of reflective thought that solidifies the personal values,

beliefs, and philosophies that guide the practices and performance of educational leaders (Tate, 2003).

### **Authentic Leadership**

The term authentic leadership is focused on how leaders present their true selves. According to Gardner, Cogliser, Davis and Dickens (2011), “truly authentic leaders must lead, but they must do so in a way that honors their core values, beliefs, strengths—and weaknesses” (p. 1142). Shamir and Eilam (2005) believed that the development of authentic leaders is directly related to the development of their self-concept and self-knowledge, and that the development of these attributes is directly related to the leaders’ life stories (p. 395). Shamir and Eilam (2005) also maintained that “life-stories provide authentic leaders with a self-concept that can be expressed through the leadership role. For instance, they provide the leader with knowledge and clarity about their values and convictions” (p. 402).

According to Sims, Mclean, and Mayer (2007), leaders discover their authentic selves by understanding who they are and they “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads” (p. 1). Sims et al. (2007) addressed the power of stories in the development of authenticity in leaders:

While the life stories of authentic leaders cover the full spectrum of experiences—including the positive impact of parents, athletic coaches, teachers, and mentors—many leaders reported that their motivation came from a difficult experience in their lives. (p. 2)

### **Latino Culture and Leadership**

Powerful leadership shapes, guides, and reinforces the culture within a school. Principal leadership provides the foundation for creating a vision, articulating goals, and

creating a sense of purpose. An effective principal provides direction and is essential to exercising influence within the building as it relates to goals, professional development, and outcomes (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). There is research that suggests that Hispanic/Latino leaders understand the challenges that Latinos encounter in learning while valuing language and culture (Hernandez et al., 2016). Some may perceive this leadership in the form of a heroic figure—one who stands in front, leading the way to the correct path, the knight upon the white horse destined to save the day.

However, Bordas (2013) indicated that Latinos in leadership positions strive to serve and create inclusiveness. Specifically, Bordas (2013) enumerated 10 characteristics of Latino leadership (see Figure 1) from the Hispanic culture and family *that exemplify this sense of “togetherness.”* According to Bordas (2013), “leadership is not driven by individual success or credit, but by contributing to the group welfare” (p. 3).

Bordas (2013) explained that the concept of *juntos* (we are together) “signifies the collective and collaborative nature of leadership where the leader works side by side with others” (p. 3). Figure 1 displays the ten principles that exemplify the structure of the co-principalship and how I approached my leadership experiences.

<b><i>Principle</i></b>	<b><i>Overview</i></b>	<b><i>Leadership Application</i></b>
<b>1. Personalismo</b>	<i>Every person has inherent worth and essential value.</i>	<i>Treat each person with respect regardless of status or position.</i>
<b>2. Conciencia</b>	<i>A leader must engage in in-depth reflection and self-examination.</i>	<i>Examine your intention: Why do you do what you do?</i>
<b>3. Destino</b>	<i>Every person has a distinct life path, purpose, and life pattern.</i>	<i>Know your family history and traditions.</i>
<b>4. La Cultura</b>	<i>Latinos are both a culture and an ethnic group, not a race.</i>	<i>Have a “We” orientation.</i>
<b>5. De Colores</b>	<i>Latinos are connected to 26 countries.</i>	<i>Practice Bienvenidos (welcome).</i>
<b>6. Juntos</b>	<i>Juntos means “union, being close, joining, being together.”</i>	<i>Work as part of the group and side by side with people.</i>
<b>7. ¡Adelante!</b>	<i>The US is a nation of immigrants who bring initiative, hard work, optimism, and faith.</i>	<i>Integrate the newly arrived and provide multiple services.</i>
<b>8. Sí se Puede</b>	<i>Economic discrepancies and social inequalities drive a social activist agenda.</i>	<i>Be a cultural broker and build partnerships with other groups.</i>
<b>9. La Vida Leadership</b>	<i>Latinos have a celebratory, expressive, optimistic, and festive culture.</i>	<i>Allow time to socialize. Communicate with charisma</i>
<b>10. Fe y Esperanza</b>	<i>Optimism is hope</i>	<i>Be clear on your purpose and serve something more significant.</i>

Figure 1. Ten principles of Latino leadership.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to articulate a personalized account of the co-principalship leadership model. My experience with the co-principal model was critically examined to identify the strengths, challenges, and benefits associated with this leadership model. I offer an intimate portrait of my experiences within this model to provide educators, administrators, and leaders a method to formulate an understanding of this leadership structure. Additionally, the accounts outlined within my research study may be utilized as a reflective mirror as well as a transparent window through which school leaders can gauge their respective journeys of leadership and the leadership of others.

The primary research question that guided this study was: What are the benefits and challenges involved in the implementation of a co-principal model?

The related secondary research questions that also guided this study were:

- What were the circumstances that prompted our school district to pursue the co-principal leadership structure?
- What were the fundamental leadership challenges I experienced with the implementation of a co-principalship model?
- How were my responsibilities and my partner's delineated and distributed within this structure?
- How were decisions made and conflicts resolved within this structure?

- How were relationships with parents and teachers established and maintained within this leadership structure?
- How did this experience within this structure facilitate my development of characteristics and skills associated with effective leadership?
- What are the critical planning, implementation, and monitoring recommendations for school districts to consider when implementing this leadership structure?

### **Autoethnography as a Methodology**

I will utilize the framework of an autoethnographic study to discuss my experiences within this leadership structure. Autoethnography employs a personalized, qualitative research method to investigate cultural issues and structures. Hayano (1979) maintained that autoethnography indicates anthropological studies that focus research on one's own culture to understand society and self. Autoethnography, as defined by Reed-Danahy (1997),

... is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text . . . [and] can be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her own life within a story of the social context in which it occurs. (p. 9)

According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnographic writings are autobiographical and focus on the “researcher’s own experience as a topic of investigation” (p. 733). The writer is intimately involved in the observation and analysis of the study. These are highly personalized accounts of events that assist the researcher in gaining a better understanding of a particular school of thought or practice. Autoethnographic writings include aspects of personalities, family history, relationships within the field and our narratives about workplaces, disciplines, family, friends, and self.

According to Chang (2008), autoethnography is a “powerful tool for researchers and practitioners who deal with human relations in multicultural settings” (p. 51). Chang (2008) noted that the fundamental benefits of autoethnographic research methodology center on the following:

1. Autoethnography offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers.
2. Autoethnography enhances cultural understanding of self and others.
3. Autoethnography has a potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building. (p. 52)

In my study, I outlined the circumstances and conditions that prompted the structural change in leadership in my school district. I provided prospective readers with a personal account of the issues associated with the formation and implementation of a leadership structure comprised within a co-principal model. This research study was also intended to demonstrate the power of self-reflection in the overall professional and personal development of an educational leader.

The focus of this research was the challenges I confronted within in my professional life that impacted my leadership style within the educational field. I do not doubt that the issues that I outlined and articulated reinforced and reflected the values and beliefs that I hold. Conversely, I knew that utilizing this methodological investigative measure that is dependent on self-reflection will reveal professional issues that will question and challenge some preexisting values and images that I have about the educational system. I also recognized that within this autoethnographic research paper, there will be revelations of some personal characteristics that may challenge some of my pre-existing values and beliefs. Conceivably, within the context of this study, readers will

be able to recognize themselves or provide an avenue for discussion with others within the field.

According to Duncan (2004), objections regarding the integrity of this qualitative method have centered on:

- the researcher's use of minimal reflection or analysis of events,
- the researcher's lack of full honesty and disclosure regarding events, and
- the researcher's inability to make meaningful connections between personal experiences and established knowledge and concepts. (p. 36)

The situations outlined and cataloged within an autoethnographic case study serve a variety of purposes. Starr (2010a) described how autoethnographic studies can be utilized to:

- examine educational world, the personal and the political;
- increase self-awareness of the past and present worlds; and
- engage in a transformative process for both the writer and the reader.

### **Self-Reflection**

According to Adams, Holman, and Ellis (2015), autoethnography uses “deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as reflexivity to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general” (p. 15).

Autoethnographic writings are autobiographical and focus on the researcher's own experience as a topic of investigation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The autoethnographic writer is intimately involved in the observation and analysis of what is being studied. These are highly personalized accounts of events that assist the researcher in gaining a better understanding of a particular school of thought or practice. Adams et al. (2015)

explained that “autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations on how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience” (p. 14).

Although autoethnographic studies are outlined in the form of personal narratives, they are not solely derived from opinion. Additional information within autoethnographic studies includes interviews, observations, reflective writing, and other artifacts and documents (Duncan, 2004). Ellis and Bochner (2000) described researchers’ autoethnographic studies as having a "focus outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 739). The ability to become a reflective practitioner is essential to professional growth (Barth, 2002). The ability to reflect, to become introspective, facilitates individuals' ability to understand themselves and heightens their awareness of their beliefs and value systems and solidifies the foundation in which educational leaders form their ideas, base their individual decisions, and nurture relationships (Petrie, Lindauer, & Tountasakis, 2000).

Reflective thinking “begins with a state of doubt, hesitation, or perplexity and moves through the act of searching to find material that will resolve, clarify or otherwise address the doubt” (Spalding & Wilson, 2002, p. 1394). John Dewey articulated a vision of reflective thought that was complex and thought-provoking. Dewey's concept of reflective thinking and practice was reviewed and outlined by Rodgers (2002):

1. Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with a more in-depth understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the

thread that makes the continuity of learning possible and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society.

2. Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry.
3. Reflection needs to happen in a community, in interaction with others.
4. Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and others. (p. 844)

The constructs embedded within the qualitative research methods of autoethnography are appropriate vehicles through which to study and analyze the circumstances that prompted a school district to implement a co-principal leadership model. Also, my personal account as an administrator involved in this leadership structure, provides readers with the opportunity to analyze and determine the circumstances that facilitate cohesive partnerships and how critical reflection is an essential aspect of professional and personal growth.

### **Data Collection**

According to Chang (2008), autoethnographic research methodology is characterized by a “dynamic, interrelated process that connects data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (p. 121). The relationships between and among these concepts support each construct in a cyclical process of discovery. This seamless connection facilitates the ability of the researcher to expand, confirm, or refocus investigative methods and or techniques (Chang, 2008).

Wolcott (1994) identified the aspects of data analysis and data interpretation as unique but interdependent structures. Data analysis is characterized by “the identification

of essential features and the systematic description of the interrelationships among them” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 12). Data interpretation within Wolcott’s framework entails deriving meaning from the data within specific contexts. Data interpretation within autoethnographic research incorporates the discovery of meaning from two distinct contexts. Specifically, embedded within the methods of autoethnographic studies, the researcher is “the generator, collector and interpreter of the data. For this reason, you are familiar with two different contexts: the original context of data and the context of autoethnographic interpretation and writing” (Chang, 2008, pp. 127–128).

Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) indicate that “autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context” (p. 2). This study utilized autoethnographic narratives in the form of vignettes in its collection of data, interpretation, and analysis. Qualitative narratives such as autoethnographic vignettes invite readers to experience a world and phenomena to gain insight and perspective of cultures and individuals.

### **Autoethnographic Vignettes**

The use of autoethnographic vignettes facilitates the author's ability to reflect and provide an avenue for the audience to connect and reflect upon their circumstances.

According to Pitard (2016),

the use of vignettes to examine and analyze lived experiences can provide a window through which the reader can gain an understanding of the insight which comes from placing a person with one cultural identity in a setting of different cultural norms. (p. 11)

This ability for connection and self-reflection leads readers to understand the writer's lived experience. The ability to understand the lived experience of another person

facilitates the ability to understand oneself and others. Pitard (2016) stated that the use of autobiographical vignettes can provide an opportunity for understanding for others.

Autoethnographic vignettes begin by utilizing the researcher as a primary source of information. The experiences and memories within these stories provide the framework for introspective-reflection (Wall, 2006). The reflective process allows the researcher to examine interactions between the self and others (Holt, 2003). Personal memory provides valuable information regarding the self and the perceptions of others. Activating and transferring memories from within our minds and hearts into written format creates a database for cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008).

The autobiographical vignettes within this study centered on my personal and professional experiences and how these significant events in my life contributed to the development of my beliefs and values. The vignettes included proverbs/values, mentors, family members, and cultural artifacts that had a significant impact on my life. Within this research study, personal memories were cultivated, collected, and chronicled through autobiographical vignettes. According to Chang (2008), personal memory is the building block of autoethnography, and it is an essential component in chronicling the past.

Utilizing autobiographical vignettes and subsequent reflections to record my thoughts regarding this research provided additional data for review. Self-reflective data collection is an essential foundation for analysis and interpretation within an autoethnographic research study. Chang (2008) characterized the use of self-reflection as a meta-cognitive activity that supports and reinforces a self-reflective state.

Within the body of the autoethnographic vignettes, historical facts and issues were outlined, categorized, and documented. The use of these types of materials provided an

additional opportunity for reflection, interpretation, and analysis. The list of documentary materials utilized in my research included:

- School Improvement Plans
- Professional Goals and Reflections
- Administrative Evaluations.
- Letters of recommendations
- Newspaper clippings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EIGHT VIGNETTES

#### **Vignette 1: Sacrificios y Obligaciones (Sacrifices and Obligations)**

*My mother was 10 years old when she had to quit school to clean houses to provide for her siblings. My father also left school at a young age to work and provide additional income to his family. He never completed fifth grade. They met and married and started a family in Monterrey, Mexico. My father immigrated to this country over 55 years ago and was separated from my mother for over five years. He arrived in Chicago determined to start a new life and was committed to bringing his family to this new world. Throughout those years, he worked various jobs to purchase the necessary documents that would allow my mother and my siblings to enter this country. Our family arrived in Chicago over 50 years ago. My mother placed her children into the local schools with the hope that they would succeed in this new world. Here my siblings were quickly introduced to their new country and culture.*

*In school, their names metamorphized from Maria Elena to Mary, Rebecca to Becky, Aurelia to Lila, Maria Carmen to Carmen, Ramon to Ray, Jose Francisco to Joe, Fernando to Freddy. My eldest sister was placed in a lower grade due to her lack of English language development. My older brothers were placed in remedial classes.*

*Although I was born in this country, I struggled to claim my identity within our schools. As a youth, I refused to speak Spanish outside of my family. As a teenager, I only communicated with my parents in Spanish. I am Mexican, yet my understanding of my culture is limited to my immediate family. I am an American who struggles to connect with mainstream culture. I am a Mexican-American who is struggling to recapture a*

*language and a culture that were not identified or celebrated within our schools. I am the ninth of 10 children. I am a son who still is indebted to his parents for everything I have.*

*My name is Arturo Abrego Galindo. Although in professional circles, I am known as Art Abrego. School communities refer to me as Mr. Abrego, Director, jefe, and Señor Abrego. To my parents, I am known merely as Ari. Growing up in an impoverished neighborhood in Humboldt Park, my parents made many different sacrifices to provide me with the opportunity to succeed.*

*The sacrifices my parents made, as well as countless others made by older siblings, were the threads my mother weaved in the stories she described to me on a nightly basis. These stories always concluded with the statement that it was my obligation to stay in school and continue my education to honor these sacrifices. I am here because of the sacrifices that parents and siblings made for me. Because of these sacrifices, I had the opportunity to attend college and pursue my career in education. By all accounts, I am successful. I am a husband and a father. I am an educator. I am an instructional leader.*

*I became an educator to help support families who continue to make sacrifices for their respective families. Parents and families within our society continue to make deliberate sacrifices in their lives to provide additional opportunities for their children. Their sacrifices need to be honored and honestly acknowledged. I became an educator, because it was my duty to serve these families and honor their sacrifices.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 1**

Bordas (2013) stressed that it is “essential that leaders leverage the power of history and culture so that a sense of continuity and wholeness emerges” (p. 8).

According to Bordas (2013), “four elements foster community stewardship in Latino communities that facilitate in linking the past, present, and future” (p. 8). The four elements are:

1. the power of a shared vision,
2. the power of history and cultural traditions,
3. *compartir*—the power of participation and shared responsibility.
4. *paso a paso*—the power of a step-by-step approach where each success reinforces abilities and self-confidence. (p. 8)

The ability to leverage this power develops social capital and according to Hogan (2001), social capital is focused on relationships and interconnected to the family's system of social ecology. Social capital can serve as a bonding agent between family and community. According to Viramontez Anguiano, Salinas, and Garcia (2010), social capital is deeply rooted in Latino families and communities. The authors asserted that "community engagement and leadership is manifested within their families and communities, forming a network of service and leadership" (p. 22). There is a collective sense of "La Familia" and the values that Latinos have in serving "La Gente." According to Viramontez Anguiano et al. (2010), "an appropriate paradigm to understand Latino leaders and their development of social capital is servant leadership" (p. 22).

Robert Greenleaf was a prominent educational leader and authority in the area of servant leadership. According to Greenleaf (1970),

the servant-leader is a servant first . . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions . . . The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them, there

are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. (p. 123)

I began working in this school district in 1992 as a newly hired staff member in a recently consolidated school district. Three separate school districts merged into one larger school district. I served in the school that was the most diverse. This school had the highest percentage of English Language Learners, Hispanic students, and the highest number of students who were living in poverty. This school symbolized a lighthouse for newly arriving immigrants. In the past, it was the home for families that came from Italy. When I became a teacher there, over 50% of the population was comprised of recent arrivals from Mexico. The cultural complexities within this school were further augmented by the presence of a military base and the recent housing development that were selling luxury homes on the lake front. This ever growing and expanding diversity in the areas of language, culture, economics and political power impacted this quiet suburb and this one school.

As I look back, I can still picture myself walking the hallways of that old building and gazing into the dark eyes of the students and weathered faces of their parents. These parents were seeking and hoping for the best for their children, yearning to connect and communicate with anyone at the school.

This was a community wanting to be acknowledged, recognized, and heard. In those images, I saw my siblings and my parents. I felt connected and immediately bonded to this community seeking refuge, a community reaching for tomorrow and yearning for hope. Here was a parent community dedicated and willing to sacrifice everything for their children. Cesar Chavez (n.d.), a prominent Latino leader, once prayed: "Grant me the courage to serve others; For in service there is true life" (para. 4).

Throughout my life and career, I have believed in the aspect of servant leadership. Growing up, I had always heard my father introduce himself to others through an element of service. I utilized that introduction with all the families in my community—*Mi nombre es Arturo Abrego; estoy aquí para servirles* (My name is Arturo Abrego; I am here to serve you). I had a visceral connection with the community in this school, in the eyes of these children, with the hopes and dreams of this parent community. This community was the reason I became an educator.

I recognized within these families the same stories that my mother told me and which were recounted endlessly at family celebrations. Those stories, full of desperation, anxiety, and mostly of hope were being lived out over and over within this small suburban community. Cesar Chavez taught: “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. . . . Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own” (Giancattarino, 2014, para. 1).

I was afforded many opportunities in my life. All of those opportunities came from the sacrifices that my parents made. They left their country, culture, and community for their children. I recall the nights that my mother put me to sleep; the words still echo in my heart “*mijo – tienes solo un obligacion de terminar la escuela*” (my son, you have one obligation, to finish school). At every opportunity, I communicated the following to the parents that I serve: *reconocemos los sacrificios que han hecho ustedes para sus hijos y nuestra obligacion es para servirles* (we recognize the sacrifices you have made for your children, and we are here to serve).

## **Vignette 2: El Jardín (The Garden)**

*Whenever I focus on my life as an educator, I always think of my mother. I miss her dearly, yet she lives within me every day. Although not formally educated herself, she was a brilliant and wise woman. She had some incredible talents. She was a financial guru. Somehow she was able to send three of her children to a private high school and college when my father was only making \$20,000 a year. She was a great motivational speaker. If she asked you to do something, the chances are that you would not be asked a second time. However, above all, she was an incredible gardener. In one area of the garden were multitudes of flowers glistening like freshly lit sparklers on the Fourth of July. In another area were vegetables sprouting that we never saw at our local grocery store. Cilantro, jalapenos and poblano chiles grew alongside tomatoes and stalks of corn.*

*She had these hands that were weathered, wrinkled, and worn. Her strong hands tilled the earth and effortlessly broke up dirt and prepared the soil for proper planting. Our garden was quite impressive. My mother planted her garden to sustain her family with nourishment and to have us appreciate the beauty of nature. Sitting in our backyard during the summer months was delightful.*

*Though our labors may have been something we initiated in the early spring and celebrated throughout the summer, the garden was something my mother thought about all the time. I recall that throughout the house there were scattered drawings that my mother would make of our yard as she sketched out areas for different flowers, plants, and vegetables. She understood that each respective plant required a different type of soil and perhaps different amounts of exposure to moisture and sunlight. She knew that each*

*plant was different and unique—but all the plants needed tending. Her hands at that time had the strength to combat the weeds trying to destroy her garden. I can still picture her pulling and tearing away at these uninvited and invading wild plants as they hopelessly and foolishly attempted to overtake our garden.*

*I will also remember how she would look at my siblings and me and say "Que esperas?" (What are you waiting for?); in that simple phrase, the message was clear—we would work together to see this garden grow. Collectively, we would be responsible for its growth, development and that tending to the garden this spring and summer prepared the garden for future plantings. "Nosotros tenemos que preparar y planear" (we need to plan and prepare); that was the mantra that would echo through the hallways in our house.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 2**

Those words spoken by my mother continue to reverberate in my mind and were at the center of my thoughts when I became the principal of this diverse school. I needed a plan, and I needed to make it personal. I understood from my mother that planting and sustaining a garden takes more than just dispersing seeds along the ground and waiting to see which ones survive. I also realized that you could not purchase a preassembled enclosure and expect them to grow. I understood that within each garden, the plants, flowers, and vegetables were unique and required distinctive planning to see them grow.

I became the principal of my school in a time of great debate regarding education. The essential question that confronted me at that time, and still confronts us, centers on what is the real aim and purpose of education. I faced an educational system at that time that had recently adopted NCLB. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasized

testing students to determine school success. Diane Ravitch (2011), the former Assistant Secretary of Education, once stated:

We should thank President George W. Bush and Congress for passing the No Child Left Behind Act. . . . All this attention and focus is paying off for younger students, who are reading and solving mathematics problems better than their parents' generation. (National Public Radio, 2011, para. 2)

Personally and professionally, I believed that NCLB signaled an overemphasis on the development of discrete skills that could only be measured through standardized assessment. According to Labaree (2014), NCLB was viewed as a means to narrowing the curriculum:

NCLB, however, in both its current and its future (Common Core) phases, is content to focus entirely on measuring how well students learn key elements of the content that schools teach in English, math, English, and social studies. It assumes that this academic subject matter constitutes human capital—providing the knowledge and skills that students will need in order to increase economic productivity, the gross domestic product, and national power. This is a common assumption that runs through the discourse in educational policy around the world right now, but constant repetition does not make it true. (pp. 7–8)

My thoughts, perspective, and questions were that if we focus on these shallow and basic skills, would we be able to cultivate and grow students who have firm rooted beliefs and values and be able to address cognitively complex tasks?

As I began this new position, I believed that it was essential to understand what my role was as the educational leader. As with a gardener, it is critical to ask the following question: “What is the purpose of our garden?” I believed that our educational garden is one that is needed to nurture our society with new ideas and beliefs. Our students, in addition to vital nutrients located within our core curricular programming of reading and math, also needed to be nourished with concepts and ideas associated with science and social studies, and that our children yearned for additional substance related

to the beauty and complexity related to the concepts of art, music, physical education, and character education. I firmly believed that as educators it was essential to utilize our skills and talents to nurture the whole child—that by focusing our efforts on the intellectual and artistic dispositions necessary for success, such as collaboration, problem-solving, and resiliency, we would create an educational environment that celebrated learning and growth. I believed that at the forefront of NCLB was a preoccupation with test scores. What I feared was that our community and society, and more worrisome, that some schools and school districts would measure their success on the attainment of scores on a standardized test. That was not what I believed. I would and could not merely plant a garden to see how high the plants could grow. I was determined to focus our educational endeavors on addressing the multifaceted needs of our students and school.

I believe that the depth and complexity of our curricular standards must align with our educational initiatives. I think that educational reforms need to take into account the depth and complexity of the students we serve. I was adamant that the essence of educating children should focus on developing an educational environment where learning and teaching are achieved through a partnership of students, staff, family, and the community. I embraced the construct that instructional strategies and resources within the school should address the intellectual, artistic, social-emotional, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the school.

Throughout my educational career, I have embraced the complexity and benefits that schools derive from a diverse student body. As a child, I was amazed not only by the variety of flowers, plants, and vegetables within our garden, but also amazed at how each

of the plants appeared to grow in harmony together. My mother and her friends added gates to their existing fences so a community garden could be created. Our neighbors became familiar with the taste of cilantro and the courage it takes to sample freshly picked jalapenos. Our family began to appreciate the taste of homemade spaghetti sauce and wine. We cared for each other's gardens because it was the right thing to do. We understood that by working together it solidified our sense of community, and that pride and ownership of the garden were shared and celebrated by everyone.

I firmly believe that it is essential that educators establish meaningful relationships with families so that a school can build a community that is committed to working together to support not only the school, but also each of the individual students within the school. NCLB focused its efforts on accountability. I believe that the policies and political posturing that have occurred within our country have led to increased accountability within public schools. I believe in accountability; we should embrace it and cherish this obligation. The intended purposes of NCLB were designed to hold educators accountable. NCLB stipulated the use of high-stakes standardized tests to ensure accountability for all students. I agreed with former President George W. Bush when he declared "accountability is an exercise in hope." I believed in the basic principles associated with NCLB, but I did not agree with the use of standardized assessments as the only measure of success. I believed that the use of these results to determine if a school was successful or was a "failing school" was not productive. NCLB threatened to impose a variety of different sanctions on schools that were not meeting adequate yearly progress in the areas of reading and math. I believed that accurate assessment is dynamic and encapsulates the complexity of a child.

Ravitch (2010) began to recognize this complexity and made the following assessment:

The current emphasis on accountability has created a punitive atmosphere in the schools. . . . They do not recognize that schools are often the anchor of their communities, representing values, traditions and ideals that have persevered across decades. They also fail to recognize that the best predictor of low academic performance is poverty—not bad teachers. (pp. 1–2)

I firmly believed that any policy or procedure that was punitive or supported the idea of limiting the potential of a child by focusing instruction on discrete skills would be met with outrage by educators and the general public. I was amazed at the lack of concern from my colleagues and the types of educational practices that were encompassed by this initiative. I held the conviction that the predominant perspective of education at that time was based on fear and a sense of desperation. This was clearly articulated in the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report criticized our educators and our schools: “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 9).

The intentions of NCLB and ESSA are to be applauded. However, I believed that the real purpose of these mandates was centered on testing and geared toward segregation and the tracking of students. It was punitive and could cause schools to become competitive as opposed to cooperative. I was terrified that the focus on testing would narrow the curriculum, and the cost for students would be their limited exposure to and participation in the fine arts and extracurricular activities. I was an instructional leader who firmly believed that our instructional practices must prepare students to become

broadly literate. Students must be prepared to become well-rounded adults who can find a career or vocation, who are responsible, respectful, and can regulate their emotions and be part of a greater community striving to make connections to the world. These were the ideas I believed in; this is what I communicated to my interview committee; this is how I approached my staff.

### **Vignette 3: Premios y Castigos (Awards and Punishments)**

*In July 2001, I embraced my new position as the school principal for this fantastic school. I became responsible for a newly constructed \$15 million building and was entrusted to establish a new culture within the school. I was a first-year principal who within in his first few weeks had addressed the 9/11 attacks and all the newly implemented safety measures that were put into place nationwide. I had also recently hired 20 new staff members.*

*In January 2002, our school was nominated by our school district for a Those Who Excel Award in the category of Learning Organization. The nominating letter began with these words:*

*Imagine a school in which the staff is focused on learning goals, a school which creatively incorporates technology into the curriculum, a school which celebrates diversity, and you have captured the essence of this wonderful school. This school has a rich history, dating back to 1916 when this neighborhood school met the needs of it recently immigrated Italian community.*

*The letter continued, affirming the school community for it shared vision, warm atmosphere, and its data-driven improvement planning:*

*In recent years, a large Hispanic population has chosen to make this town home. For many years, this school has also met the needs of children affiliated with the military. The shared vision of the staff, students, and parents are readily apparent. The atmosphere is warm and student-centered, and the staff is renowned in the district for its collaborative spirit. The well-being of the whole child is at the heart of everything teachers and administrators do. They know all*

*the students and families extremely well, forming a true community of learners. However, this school's reputation does not rest only on the warmth of its atmosphere, as important as that is to learning. It is a solidly data-driven organization, with an impressive school improvement plan that utilizes school and district assessment data to identify patterns of strength and weakness within the curriculum of a particular grade-level and to make the necessary modifications.*

*The School Improvement Plan also relies heavily on CBM's, CTBS, and ISAT data, as well as district performance assessments. Principal Art Abrego and staff have a keen awareness of the importance of data-driven decision making.*

*The nomination letter further highlighted the new building and the good things happening within it:*

*A new building was recently constructed—however, during the construction the students and staff were relocated to another site. The faculty and students handled all these transitions very smoothly; in fact, it only seemed to increase the strong sense of unity and mission that permeates the school.*

*Indeed, there was no prouder moment for our district than in September 2001, when the new, beautiful, prairie-style building was dedicated before hundreds of community members and alumni. However, it had been Art Abrego and his staff who took this spectacular building and made it a real school, a school with a heart. The school provides a rich academic learning experience, and there are other opportunities for children to use their talents have also increased, including the acclaimed . . . Speech Contest, and the participation in the internationally known . . . Children's Choir. While all . . . of our schools have enjoyed success in recent years, this school stands out as a cohesive learning organization that demonstrates excellence and models itself after the state standards. Perhaps the most apt testimony I could give to this school excellence is this: if I had a child of elementary age, this is the school I would want my child to attend. We are incredibly proud to present this wonderful school for your consideration as a learning organization that truly excels.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 3**

In April, we earned an Award of Merit from the state and celebrated with the staff and community. At that time, this district had also concluded its interviewing process for a new superintendent. We had also just completed the packing of our Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) and Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (IMAGE) results. It was the first year under NCLB and not only would our ISAT tests results be considered for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) status but also our IMAGE assessments.

Everything appeared to be in order, our district had selected our school for a prestigious award, and we opened a new building, cultivated a new culture within this new facility, and we were on a path to success.

However, by June 2002, based on a clerical error, we were being identified as a failing school under the new law. We were barreling toward the world of NCLB, and little did I know that I would be the new immigrant to this foreign land.

I was filled with fear, and my thoughts and motivation appeared to be in a paralyzed state. I was in the second year in my principalship. A new superintendent was hired and we began to work together. My second year as a building principal was filled with many challenges. Whatever confidence and bravado I had in my first year, had quickly dissipated. I was provided with mentors to support me as continued to learn this position. At the end of my second year, by all accounts I appeared to be making a difference. However, the reality was that I was a struggling principal who was expected to have all the answers and turn a school around. The fear that I felt was not a unique experience for school leaders. According to Schoen and Fusarelli (2008), the issue of fear was rampant across schools:

The greater the consequences for not attaining testing goals, the more threatening and high pressure the school or district becomes as a work environment. High-stakes environments create a single-minded focus on avoiding sanctions, accompanied by a fear to attempt anything new or untried. Fear, directly or indirectly emanating from NCLB, can become pervasive in schools and can dictate where educators are willing to invest their time and attention. (p. 192)

My annual principal evaluation, which was conducted in February, was honest and truthful and very difficult to comprehend and accept. As I read the evaluation and comments I was acutely aware of how much I needed to grow and mature as a leader.

The evaluation outlined the following:

*Art has not yet comfortably settled into his role as chief administrator at his school. Although he wants to do a good job, Art is challenged by the long-range planning, attention to detail and public relations component to the job. Although no administrator will ever be able to fully satisfy all demands by parents, the criticism that parents have not been listened to can be diminished. Art needs to prove himself to be a match to his assignment and to understand and bring together the diverse cultures of his community. Although it is natural to be discouraged by these ongoing distractions and questions, I caution Art to guard against acting the victim, and closing himself off to constructive ideas and ways to best interact with his community. Art does not yet exude and communicate the confidence necessary to put the community's and staff's mind at ease. Art has exhibited what I believe to be a sincere willingness to learn, to improve his practices and to model continuous learning. He has cooperated with the Central Office administrators who have met with him for the purpose of mentoring Art through this year. I recommend that this mentoring continue as a support to address the goals outlined in the professional goal plan accompany this evaluation. Art has the desire and the fundamental skill set to be a very capable and successful administrator. His background, his bilingual ability and his motivation to do well are assets to his career. He needs to develop confidence and maturity on his assignment and communicate more effectively with his staff and community. I look forward to working with Art as his contract has been renewed for an additional one-year period.*

Within two years, my leadership journey had led me to a crossroads. I decided to follow my heart and moved forward.

**Vignette 4: A Donde el Corazón se Inclina, el Pie Camina**  
(Where the Heart Leans, the Foot Walks)

*The local paper announced to the public my appointment to the position of principal by a unanimous vote of the board at a crowded meeting. Typically, the approval of a new principal is rather routine and mundane. My appointment to the office of the principalship was dramatic, filled with audience participation and many doubts.*

*Although I was the unanimous choice of each of the interviewing committees, there was controversy and concern regarding my selection. A week after I was offered and accepted the position, and about three weeks before the board of education (BOE) meeting, the superintendent came to speak to me regarding an issue that was brewing in the community. According to the superintendent, there was a group of parents distributing postcards and encouraging community members to attend the BOE meeting to speak out against my appointment. There was a concern that I did not have the administrative experience to lead this school. There were also rumors circulating that my educational certifications and degrees were from Latin American countries.*

*The meeting room was filled with community and staff members. I sat in the audience waiting for the personal agenda items. Several parents approached the microphone during the open comments portion of the meeting. Each one expressed concern that the candidate in question was too inexperienced for this position. The candidate in question was not ready for this assignment. The candidate in question needed more experience in general education. The candidate in question, the candidate in question, that was the phrase that was repeated throughout the night with each of the public comments. Although this was supposed to be a confidential process, everyone in the audience and the community was aware that I was the recommended candidate. But*

*throughout the night, my name was never uttered through the public comments. I was the candidate in question.*

*After the public statements, the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources presented my name for the principal position. My name was finally read out loud. Arturo Abrego. I was no longer the candidate in question. As the assistant superintendent read my credentials, appearing to enunciate each syllable of each university I attended, purposefully. "Arturo received his bachelor degree from Loy-o-la U-ni-ver-si-ty, his first master degree from U-ni-ver-si-ty of Il-i-nois, and his second master degree from North-east-ern U-ni-ver-si-ty of Chi-ca-go. As she continued to outline my qualifications and the process for selection, detailing each leadership position I held within the school and district, all I could think of was the sacrifices my mother made to have her children have the opportunity to reach their dreams. With those thoughts in my mind, I immediately raised my hand and requested the opportunity to address the audience. I spoke of this incredible school and how in the past this school served as a beacon for so many families, and how it would continue to serve as a lighthouse in welcoming newly arriving families seeking hope and a better future for their children. I wanted to acknowledge their sacrifices. I wanted to provide them with reassurances.*

*I addressed the BOE and the community with a message that I would be filled with hope and a bright future: "This is a unique opportunity, one in which a partnership can occur between parents, teachers, and students . . . We are fortunate to be moving into a new building this fall. We will have a new school, wonderful staff members, concerned parents, and great kids." I loved this school and community. I did what love does to you; following my heart, I took a step forward.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 4**

Whenever I think about this event, I always think of my parents. Before the appointment to this position, a colleague of mine was appointed to a central office position within the same district. It occurred about a month or two before my appointment. I remember seeing his parents in the audience, and I thought that was so amazing. I wanted to do the same. However, on that night, as I sat and waited, my heart ached not from the rumors and concerns that were whispered on the streets and proclaimed within a public setting, but for the fact that my parents were not in attendance. I had decided to spare my parents this spectacle.

Throughout my life, my parents did everything they could to provide for our schooling. To afford tuition for school, my mother would go to the Salvation Army and purchase clothes. Every day she would wash and mend those same clothes so they could be sold each weekend at a flea market. My parents would be gone each weekend selling clothes, coke, and tacos to other people who would never dare enter a Salvation Army Store.

As I grew older and began to accompany my parents to these weekend events, I could see and sense that every decision my parents made was to ensure a future for their children. Bordas (2015) indicated that sacrifice and obligation are at the core of effective Latino leadership. Although my parents never completed elementary school, through their efforts, they were able to send their three youngest children to local u-ni-ver-si-ties.

I am an educator, and my two other brothers are physicians. My parents never completed school, but they loved education, and they understood the power that schooling could provide for those who were willing to sacrifice. Sacrifice was at the core

of how our family operated. My parents sacrificed for their children and my sibling made sacrifices for each other. My parents taught me that sacrifice and hard work create opportunities for one another and create sense of yearning and belonging. Bordas (2015) believed that effective leaders create a sense of belonging and that by working together we can all be successful:

Effective leaders, therefore, create inclusive environments that encourage diverse people to generate viable solutions and desired results. Leaders must be able to hand over the reins and shift the locus of control from I as the leader to We—the people served by the leader. In response to these changes, leadership has become more collaborative, people centered, and inclusive. (p. 56)

Bordas (2015) further stressed that Latinos are focused on creating a sense of community and having strong values that solidify a sense of cohesiveness: “Latinos come from a *We* or people-oriented culture. They are natural collaborators, having learned to contribute to their families and community at an early age. Values such as reciprocity, cooperation, and generosity encourage collaboration” (p. 15).

My parents taught me about sacrifice, family, and collaboration. I learned that my role within our family was built on a foundation of service, sacrifice, and obligations. Although my parents were not physically present for the formal recommendation, they were at the forefront of my thoughts.

I do not talk about this night very often. I have never told anyone in my family about the events that took place the night I became a school principal. However, whenever I speak of this event to friends and colleagues, I watch their faces as they begin to understand the circumstances, and I see their faces move from bewilderment to outrage.

I never thought of this night in anger. I never thought of this night as a veiled attempt at discrimination and racism. I saw this night as one of fear...fear of loss and fear of change. This district was undergoing massive change. Historically, the school district had served families that had lived within the community from past generations. These families had arrived at this community from Europe, mainly Italy and had established and invested their lives in the small suburb. Generations had attended the school. However, the new families arriving in this community and school were recent arrivals from Mexico. They lived in rented apartments, usually with multiple families living together. This community was under tremendous change—a previous generation trying to hold onto the past and future generations that were already here.

I became the principal of this school in a time of significant change. The newly consolidated school district brought two cities and three distinct school districts together. I moved into a freshly built 15 million dollar facility. I became the principal of a building where over 50% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch; 15% our families were affiliated with the military, and the rest of the community was split between families that had attended our school as children and families that recently purchased million-dollar homes. I was the principal of an urban city school located in the suburbs with a diverse community that came together in one school. I was a new principal wandering through the alphabet soup of the acronyms associated with NCLB. I was the instructional leader of a school that served families that had historically supported newly arriving immigrant families seeking a better life for their children. I decided to ignore the whispers, rumors, and misconceptions and follow my heart and serve my community. I chose to lead.

### **Vignette 5: La Persona Encargada es la Persona Que Manda (The Person in Charge is the Person in Command)**

*In March 2004, three years after my appointment to the principalship and one month after my critical evaluation, I met once again with the superintendent. I was aware that the room was somewhat warm, and there was a sense of anxiety on her face. She began the meeting by stating that she supported me professionally, but it did not feel that way when she uttered these words: “Art, there will be a change in the leadership structure next year.” She then presented me an article entitled *A New Type of Leadership: Co-Principalship*. The superintendent wanted me to review the material and determine if this was something I wanted to consider.*

*The article was not very lengthy. It was about two pages. The document centered on the complexities associated with the responsibilities of being a building principal. It highlighted that the current challenges and expectations for school principals had evolved throughout the years and that the difficulties with poverty, second language learning, and special education were impacting the roles and responsibilities of the office of the principal. It outlined an alternative way to address school leadership. I was numb, yet still keenly aware of my environment. The superintendent looked shocked as I reached over and said “this must be very difficult for you.”*

*This change in the leadership structure centered on employing two principals to lead the school. We agreed that she would address the staff and that I would have a conversation with the assistant principal, for this change in leadership structure directly impacted his role and position as well as mine. I had asked her specifically if the assistant principal could apply for this position; she indicated that he would not be a viable candidate. The superintendent would hire an administrator with experience as a*

*building principal and one who had experience with second language learners. It was also clear that my role in the building would also change regarding leadership and responsibilities. However, at that time, I had no idea how those changes would impact my professional and personal development as an educational leader. I wanted our school to succeed; I once again decided to follow my heart and serve my community. Besides, the person in charge had spoken, and the decision was final.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 5**

I entered the principalship believing that learning should be an active process that is goal oriented and tailored to the needs of the students we serve. My responsibility as an educational and instructional leader was to work cooperatively with teachers and families, developing and nurturing a school climate that is supportive of individual learning styles. I believed that the school principal would provide leadership to facilitate an educational environment that values, respects, and celebrates cultural and linguistic diversity, where students are encouraged and taught to set goals, make choices, and accept responsibility for their learning. I believed that students who are encouraged and supported educationally, socially, and emotionally to resolve problems as individuals and within cooperative groups create an atmosphere where excellence is expected. I believed that I had the leadership qualities to enhance and support the educational opportunities for all children and promote the development of a successful and inclusive school.

The superintendent communicated that I needed to decide on this structure and that we needed to set up a meeting to inform the staff. After my conversation with the superintendent, all of those beliefs were challenged. I was devastated. This conversation appeared as though the superintendent was questioning my ability as an instructional

leader, and I felt lost. Did I make a mistake? Doubts circulated within my mind and heart. These same uncertainties were articulated at the board of education meeting by some community members who were echoing in my mind and causing me to question my heart and my decisions. I felt like a failure. I was a failure. I was not a leader. I was paralyzed with fear and despair.

I was sitting there feeling sorry for myself when the phone rang. It was the assistant superintendent for human resources. She asked how I was doing, and I decided that I would be honest about my feelings. What I shared with her was that I was scared and that I considered this leadership structure to be a direct message suggesting that I was not up to the job of leading the school. I was upset with myself, and I was looking for confirmation of my abilities. That is when I was told very directly by the assistant superintendent that if they did not believe in me, the structural change would have included my dismissal.

I was being offered a lifeline. The assistant superintendent indicated that the complexities of the school were so vast that they were concerned not only with the students within the school, but also the educational leaders. They were worried about me, and they wanted me to be a part of the organization. The structural changes at the leadership level would not only include the co-principalship model, but would also include the addition of a school improvement and assessment coordinator. They wanted to tap into my expertise entirely and that the current configuration was not allowing that to occur. The senior leadership group wanted our school to succeed; they wanted me to realize my goals.

Bridges (2009) emphasized that professionals and organizations need to recognize the difference between change and transition and noted that “change is a situational issue and that transition, on the other hand, is psychological” (p. 3). Bridges further asserted that change, like the reorganization of leadership, is a situational issue that occurs in every organization. However, the psychological process of transition is a “three-phase process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the new situation that the change brings about” (Bridges, 2009, p. 3).

Bridges (2009) explained that the three-phase process of transition involves the following:

1. Letting go of old ways and the old identity that people had. This first phase of transition is an ending, and the time when you need to help people to deal with their losses.
2. Going through an in-between time when the old is gone but the new isn't fully operational.
3. Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning. This is when people develop a new identity, experience new energy, and discover the new sense of purpose that makes the change begin to work. (pp. 4–5)

The announcement to the staff of this new leadership structure was made at one of the building meetings. I stood alongside my superintendent as she explained the decision to the staff. We would be seeking an instructional leader who had experience as a building principal. I would oversee all student services, including Response to Intervention (RTI), early childhood programming, special education, and gifted education. I would also supervise the transportation and registration process within our

school. My partner would oversee the instructional leadership as it related to core curriculum planning, and we would work together to develop school-wide goals for our school improvement plan. I adhered to the ideas that Bridges (2009) outlined when he stated:

Only people—like you—can recognize that change works only if it is accompanied by transition. Only people—like you—can learn to manage transitions so that changes that trigger them aren't jeopardized. Only people—like you—can implement change in such a way that people actually get through it and the organization doesn't end up being hurt rather than helped. (pp. 10–11)

There were no questions. There were no further explanations. I was in charge of my life and my decisions, and it was time to co-lead.

### **Vignette 6: Juntos y Unidos (Together and United)**

*When residents moved into the town of Tanglegate (pseudonym), an affluent neighborhood that was created a few years ago next to our district, they made a pact to stick with our struggling school and work together to make it better. But after the school did not meet the testing goals in 2004 as legally required, parents had the option to transfer their children to another elementary school. Preliminary test results showed that our school did not meet state goals because children with limited English skills did not score high enough. The school's overall scores increased in reading, math, and writing, including a 19% increase in 5th-grade reading results. The 5th grade scores were at 71% for meeting and exceeding the standards and at 78% in math. However, these scores were below the district's average scores, which were as high as 96%. The school had unusual diversity for the district, wherein 60% of students were Hispanic, 40% were White, and 5% were Black. Also, over 60% of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Our school has improved over the past few years. A new school building opened*

*four years earlier. There was now a newsletter, art classes, music and science courses, the dual language program had expanded, and a co-principal was added. A community meeting was to be held to discuss test scores and transfer options for students and families.*

*This community meeting was scheduled very early in the school year and was the first opportunity for the co-principalship configuration to be on display for the community. My partner was hired in late April and began her position in July. It was readily apparent that the chosen candidate was a tenacious educational leader who had worked in very diverse educational environments. I remember the answer to one of her questions "We set a goal. We set our indicators, and we work until we achieve the desired results. We do that together." That was the foundation for our meeting. We made a vow to work together to communicate our vision to the community and more importantly, to make sure that all of our families remained in our school and would not pursue the transfer option under NCLB.*

*With that in mind, one of our first planning sessions for this community meeting centered on reviewing the School Improvement Plan. We discussed the goals that we had in place for the school and that we had implemented over the last few years. The goals outlined and promoted throughout the previous few years were designed to create an educational environment that was rigorous, respectful, and relevant to all learners in the building. These goals were intended to create an educational environment that would celebrate each child and establish the foundation for them to be successful within the educational system. We both were fully aware that the acquisition of Cognitive Academic Language Skills in English would take five to seven years for some of our students and*

*that an essential way to create a foundation of success was to solidify their native language development. Our school had established a dual language program, and we realigned our focus in our bilingual program to emphasize literacy development in Spanish. The 2001–2004 goals that we had developed centered on the use of data to guide instructional groups, tiered interventions, and the implementation of a balanced reading approach in each of the classrooms with a high emphasis on creating guided reading groups for students. As I was reviewing all of these issues, my partner just stopped and said, "We need to address the test scores immediately. We need to prepare the students for the test. Nothing in school will ever become fully accomplished until those test scores are turned around." I looked at her and said, "This cannot be all about test scores." She just looked at me and replied, "You are in this situation because of the test scores; it's all about the test scores. I will address that aspect."*

*One week before the community meeting, I once again had the opportunity to meet with my superintendent. As I sat and waited for our meeting, I reviewed my notes and the highlights from our school improvement plan. I was surprised that I was meeting with her alone, but she just wanted to meet with me. As she entered the room, she greeted me and thanked me for the flexibility in my schedule. She was very direct in her words and approach. She indicated that she wanted my partner to take the lead in regard to instructional leadership within the building. As I sat there, I realized that this was a continuation of our initial discussion regarding a leadership change within the school. We had spoken about this in our initial conversation, but I had not remembered all the details. My partner would be the lead instructional leader within the building. I would oversee the tiered interventions, special education, and management of the building.*

*Although we had this discussed this issue previously, hearing these words once again was very difficult. My superintendent noticed my discomfort. She looked at me and said, “You need help; let us help you. Allow your partner to help you. She has a proven track record of turning scores around. She knows how to prepare students for the tests”*

*I told my superintendent that I was here to serve. I was determined not to let my ego or self-doubt interfere with my ability to create a partnership focused on building a community focused on the needs of our students. I was submerged in feelings of inadequacies and self-doubt for so long that I had paralyzed myself with fear. I thought that I had hidden these fears well, but in reality, they had caused me to question my leadership skills and nearly lose my position in this school. I would serve our school. I would help our community. I would, in the end, also work in collaboration with my partner to heal our community.*

*The community meeting had been advertised for several months. We had reviewed the agenda with the staff and requested that they attend the meeting. The multipurpose room was full, and all necessary power points were developed and translated. We had reviewed the agenda and presentation with district leadership and our teaching staff. As the night began, the division that existed within our community could be seen within the room. In one area, the Hispanic families sat, in another were the families affiliated with the military, and yet in another area were our most affluent families. We were a community divided by income, language, culture, and power. The school was our unifying factor; it was the place, the venue where we came together for a single purpose—the children. We were meeting to explain the concept of school choice, but in reality, the purpose of the meeting was to keep us from splintering into different factions.*

*The superintendent walked in and spoke to both of us. She wished us the best and took her seat in the back with other district leaders. I lead the meeting. Initially, I introduced my administrative partner and the rest of our support team. I also presented our staff and had them stand-up as a united team. The rest of the night we spent outlying the choice options for parents, but we also highlighted what we had accomplished and what we were seeking to achieve. My partner focused on test scores and vowed they would improve.*

*The 2003–2004 test results for pupils with limited English proficiency did not meet adequate yearly progress. Under the No Child Left behind Act, 100 hundred of our students were eligible to attend other district schools. However, priority would be given to low-income children. Our school faced challenges that were different from many of the schools in our geographic area. Near the time of our community meeting, I made the following public comments: "Poverty is the number one issue that affects the kids in our building. Granted, they are learning a second language. Typically, children who learn a second language who are not in poverty learn it pretty quickly. Children who are in poverty have other issues to attend to." My co-principal was also quoted as saying "Our goal is not to lose one . . . Several families have inquired about the option, but none have indicated they want to transfer their children to the other alternative schools selected by the district, said the school's other co-principal."*

*The parent-teacher meeting that started with a discussion of transfer options due to our failure to meet federal testing standards ended with a pledge to improve the school's performance. At this meeting, I said, "This is not a time to divide; this is a time to unite. This is not a time to finger-point. We need to stay together."*

*The superintendent approached my partner and me at the end of the event and indicated that she was very impressed with the meeting. She then looked at me and said, "I am so proud of you and for your call for unity."*

### **Reflection on Vignette 6**

One of the most challenging aspects of this entire experience was keeping a school community together. I believe that the community meeting to discuss choice options associated with NCLB was a significant moment to communicate to all stakeholders our belief in and commitments toward a united school community.

I was fully aware of factions within our community that were based on the school's demographics. Some of these divisions were based on fear, some on misinformation, and some squarely based on racial prejudices. I was also fully aware that there were factions within the school and community that were very supportive of my work as a school principal and disagreed with the leadership change. Conversely, there were also members within our professional organization and the community at large that were not supportive of me and welcomed this leadership reconfiguration. I was fully aware of all these issues the night of this community event and saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate our unity within in this newly configured leadership structure of the co-principalship.

It was essential that we were viewed as a united team of instructional leaders focused on creating an educational environment that was rigorous, relevant, and respectful to all learners and a team that embraced the richness of diversity and celebrated the learning of all children. My initial approach to solidifying this unity was centered on creating trust. The most fundamental component of any successful relationship is based

on the aspect of trust. Trusting another person is placing your faith and confidence in that person and allowing oneself to be vulnerable. According to Brené Brown's (2012) web-based leadership series,

...leadership has nothing to do with position, salary, or number of direct reports. Do we have the courage to show up, be seen, take risks, ask for help, own our mistakes, learn from failure, lean into joy, and can we support the people around us in doing the same. (para. 1)

According to Eckman (2007), the fundamental aspect in creating a co-principalship model is to address significant school related issues:

The co-principalship model is seen by many school districts as a way to face the complex and demanding tasks of raising student academic performance while managing a school's day-to-day operations. It offers an alternative for leading schools that benefits the individual principal, parents, teachers, and students. (p. 49)

This relationship was an avenue for me to learn and a pathway for me to teach. I was learning from my experiences and was allowing myself to be exposed to new ideas and thoughts. I was learning how to lead in an age of accountability and the pressures associated with them. I was also learning how to advocate, negotiate, and compromise. I was also learning how and when to maintain my convictions and not compromise. I was learning to allow myself to fully gaze into the mirror and examine the blemishes that had surfaced and the scars that formed from my insistent picking. I was learning to accept my flaws and embrace the image within the mirror. I was learning to view myself from a variety of perspectives. Some of those examinations, which I had mastered early in my career, encompassed a microscopic view where I dissected each of the decisions that I made to the point that examined and re-examined every decision. That exercise in futility led to frustration and the perception of indecisiveness.

The most fundamental leadership challenge that was experienced within this leadership structure concerned how to address the issues with our test scores. I had vehemently opposed test preparation; my focus and vision for the school were to provide an educational experience that would address the cognitive, social, and emotional issues of children. As a by-product of this process, our scores would improve and advance. I began to question if I had been somewhat naïve in this approach. The test and scores had caused a fracture within in our school. It had caused parents in the community to question my leadership skills, and it had caused me to doubt myself. I sat and listened to the plan as outlined by my partner. She indicated that reading would be the most fundamental priority within the school, and it would be the responsibility of everyone to incorporate reading within their curriculum. She had created a schedule that would include opportunities for students to arrive at school early for reading, have a lunchtime reading session, and afterschool reading opportunities. Also, my partner had received support from our superintendent to reassign one of our most talented and respected teachers to become a literacy coach within the school. She would also create a book exchange club in the cafeteria that would allow students to take or donate a favorite book for others to read. The book exchange club would be initially supported by donations from our PTA and the greater community. In addition to all of these changes, she would also create PD opportunities for all of the staff that would be available through our building meetings. She also would attend all team meetings to discuss literacy issues. I fully supported all of these changes. I recognized that I needed to follow one of the most significant factors that provided the foundation for success in this type of leadership structure. Eckman (2007)

insisted that true partnerships were essential for individual and organizational growth and that true partnerships were based on the following:

Co-principals had to “check their egos” for two individuals to effectively share the role. They had to understand when to argue for their position and when to compromise. Sharing leadership depended on developing a trusting relationship with their partners and on knowing how to share equally in the successes and failures of the job. (p. 49)

In addition to all of these fundamental changes, my partner also insisted that all teachers would create opportunities for students to take practice ISAT and IMAGE tests. She was insistent that students and teachers have this opportunity not only to practice these assessments, but that lessons be developed to underscore the concepts in the tests. Students would also address these practice tests during computer lab time by participating in a self-pacing computer software program designed to prepare them for the test. There would also be pep rallies to prepare for the assessments. I focused on the concept of unity and decided to trust.

**Vignette 7: Paso por Paso y Poco por Poco Llegarás a Tu Destino  
(Step by Step and Little by Little You Arrive at Your Destination)**

*A call for unity was what I was seeking from the community. My partner and I met with several families that were considering moving their children to other schools; however, after meeting with us, they decided to stay. A call for unity was what I was seeking under the pressures associated with NCLB sanctions. I was committed to keeping our community united even with the impact of lower test scores. A call for unity within in our school community was what was needed. A call for leadership is what is required when a community and school are on the verge of splintering into factions reflective of income, language, and skin color. Leadership was needed to provide a plan and structures to promote learning and growth. Leadership was required to create a sense of*

*urgency and determination to provide an educational environment focused on big ideas, essential questions, and shared outcomes. Leadership was needed to prioritize our standards, align our assessments, and create learning experiences tailored to the multifaceted needs of our students. Leadership and unity in the form of a collaborative partnership within the office of the principal were required. This unity and direction would be the fulcrum point where real change and growth would occur in the form of a professional learning community focused on learning—a call for leadership and unity, a road that needed to be traveled by all, step by step, to reach our destination.*

*There were two comments from our community meeting that reverberated throughout this partnership. The first, "It takes two years to get on the list. It takes two years to get off the list," said a school district official. "Can we make it happen? You bet we can." The second comment was from a parent in the community who lived in one of the more affluent areas within our community: "After seeing the progress made . . . it seems like No Child Left Behind is not necessarily affecting my children, unless I'm missing something,"*

*Both of these quotes were prophetic in their accuracy. The sanctions associated with NCLB were not impacting those students within our school who were not affected by poverty. The ramifications of the sanctions did not impact students whose primary language was English. These were the quotes that accompanied our journey of leadership that we initially walked in unison. However, with every step, the focus began to center more and more on testing as opposed to learning, focused more on procedures as opposed to the learning process. Step by step, as we traveled this road, the signpost*

*was littered with words and acronyms like AYP, NCLB, low-income, sub-groups, and failing school.*

*Under NCLB, to be removed from the list of failing schools would require two years of meeting testing standards. As we traveled down this highway, off in the distance, I could see gardens, gardens like the ones my mother grew in our yard. But with each step, the beauty and balance cultivated within these gardens were fading away with each step I took. The aroma of roses, cilantro, and lilies slowly dissipated, and the colorful array of flowers and plants were beginning to disappear and fade away.*

*My partner and I were no longer walking in unison. I would frequently turn, trying to run back to a destination that seemed like a distant memory, trying to identify side roads that only merged and lead back to a path that was surrounded by uniformed crops tended to for one purpose. The plantings needed to meet their yield, and every decision was made by a partner whose role appeared to be that of an industrial farmer who was focused on bringing in a large-sized crop—uniformed rows of vegetation planted and every day focused on having every seed reach a specific height. The goal was test performance and test preparation. This was our world, one in which the pressures of NCLB came in direct opposition to my beliefs. The world of testing and sanctions muted my voice, replaced with the cacophony of loud assemblies focused on test performance. Within this partnership, the division of our respective philosophies and approaches increased with every testing session. We were no longer walking in unison. The focus on bilingualism diminished; our bilingual students, with less and less instruction in Spanish, were on computer programs focused on test preparation. The emphasis on biliteracy was replaced with discrete skill instruction focused on fluency and accuracy.*

*My partner was a master farmer, and she had an incredible touch in growing the crops. She was successful. We were successful. However, I was no longer walking in unison with her. Every change that occurred in this school focused on preparing students to take state tests. With this new focus, our scores reflected the efforts to develop students to take these tests (see Table 1). We met the goal. However, the continued question in my mind lingered. ¿Que estas creciendo en tu jardin? What is growing in your garden?*

Table 1

*What Is Growing in Your Garden?*

Table 2 Test Scores	2001-02 1 <sup>st</sup> yr in principalship	2002-03 2 <sup>nd</sup> yr in principalship	2003-04 3 <sup>rd</sup> yr in principalship	2004-05 1 <sup>st</sup> yr Co-principalship	2005-06 2 <sup>nd</sup> yr Co-principalship
ISAT	61% Meeting Standards DNM AYP	59% Meeting Standards DNM AYP	72.5% Meeting Standards DNM AYP School Choice	82.4% Meeting Standards MET AYP School Choice	88.7% Meeting Standards Met AYP School choice removed
IMAGE	28 % Meeting Standards DNM AYP	38% Meeting Standards DNM AYP	38% Meeting Standards DNM AYP School Choice	54.7% Meeting Standards MET AYP School Choice	83.7% Meeting Standards MET AYP School Choice removed

*Note.* ISAT (Illinois Standard Achievement Test); IMAGE (Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English); DNM AYP = Did not meet Annual Yearly Progress; Met AYP = Met Annual Yearly Progress.

**Reflection on Vignette 7**

Balance, stability, and equilibrium are dynamic concepts typically associated with physical and psychological well-being. These constructs are also essential to collaborative partnerships. I realized on this journey that I am not an industrial farmer. I, like my mother, am a gardener who tends to his seedlings with the same intensity as an industrial farmer. My purpose is not solely to yield crops, but to focus on nurturing each

plant to grow and develop deep roots designed to gain and provide nourishment within the community garden.

My partner was an incredible educational leader. Working together, we were able to address the impact issues of NCLB, and within our first two years together, we moved our school from a school of choice to one that had made AYP two years in a row. In addition to this monumental achievement, our school was also expanding its capacity to provide our students with extracurricular activities designed to provide our students with opportunities beyond the classroom. We continued to provide our students with chorus and speech tournaments, but we also expanded opportunities for our students to participate in The Battle of the Books, Girls on the Run, soccer, and participation at the Northwestern Gifted Camp for several highly talented Latino students. We reconfigured several positions to include reading, learning disabilities (LD), and gifted support in Spanish. We were addressing the issues as outlined through NCLB and focusing our efforts on expanding learning opportunities for our students beyond the classroom. We also developed a mentoring program where we identified local Latino students to be student mentors with our fifth grade students and took multiple opportunities to take our students to local colleges and universities so they could experience and see institutes of higher learning. We had transformed a school.

However, with all of the changes, the balance, stability, and equilibrium that are essential for a partnership were teetering. The issue at the center of this disequilibrium was bilingual education. I was and continue to be a strong proponent of bilingual education. Our continued focus on test preparation, especially for Hispanic students, meant a greater emphasis on English language instruction geared explicitly toward test

preparation. There was no doubt that this approach impacted test results, but I was not convinced it influenced learning.

The majority of our bilingual Hispanic students were taking the Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English (the IMAGE test). This assessment was designed to measure language acquisition and development and was never intended to be used as an academic achievement test. By 2007, the IMAGE test was discontinued in Illinois. An article in *Education Week* indicated the following:

Illinois has stopped using an alternative mathematics and reading test for English-language learners because state officials haven't been able to persuade the U.S. Department of Education that the test is comparable to the state's regular tests. The Illinois Measure of Annual Growth in English, or IMAGE, uses simplified English to test ELLs in math and reading. Illinois developed the Language Arts part of the test in 1996 and several years later added the math part. (Zehr, 2007, para. 1, para. 2)

DuFour (2015) indicated that the focus on test preparation and norm-referenced testing did not yield the educational improvement that it was designed to address. Specifically, DuFour highlighted the work of the National Center for Education and Economy (NCEE) which quoted Tucker (2014) as saying, "There is no evidence that it [the reform agenda] is contributing anything to improved student performance, much less the improved performance of the very low-income and minority students for which it was in the first instance created" (p. 2).

The goal of improved test scores was met. My partner indeed accomplished the goal of raising test scores. The accomplishment is to be applauded. However, I remember feeling out of place. I remember not feeling a sense of belonging. I was no longer walking; I was being pulled in the direction of test preparation. It was not who I was, and it was not what I believed was my purpose. This sense of isolation and disorientation was

initiated and fostered through constant questioning, self-doubt, and critical self-reflection. Mezirow (1998) outlined the essential role that reflection has on “how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act on the concepts, values, and feelings of others” (p. 185). According to Mezirow (1998), reflection is a powerful means to develop awareness:

Reflection, a “turning back” on experience, can mean many things: simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one’s habits of doing things. It can also mean letting one’s thoughts wander over something, taking something into consideration, or imagining alternatives. One can reflect on oneself reflecting. (p. 185)

Mezirow distinguished this type of reflection from *critical self-reflection of assumptions*. Reflection for Mezirow (1998) “does not necessarily imply making an assessment of what is being reflected upon, a distinction that differentiates it from critical reflection” (p. 186). According to the author, when critical reflection is focused upon a well-established assumption, the possibility to alter one’s established frame of reference increases. Mezirow (1998) indicated that the process of critical self-reflection of established assumptions involve a “critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem . . . and that significant personal and social transformations may result from this kind of reflection” (p. 186).

According to Reardon, Fite, Boone, and Sullivan (2019), critical reflection “empowers emerging leaders to develop the skills and dispositions needed to address the new and reoccurring challenges of today’s work environment leaders. Critical reflection is the essential skill in effective leader development” (p. 30).

The critical reflective leader is defined and solidified through a constant search and resolution of balance intellectual of potentially competing goals (Reardon et al.,

2019). This sense of conflict between competing goals may cause some leaders to address the issue of determining if the goals of the organization and initiative may conflict with the values of the leader. If that is the case, the “leader chooses between being a ‘successful’ leader or being true to his or her personal values” (p. 28).

We had arrived at our destination, and upon arrival, I was both jet-lagged and eager to return home. I did not know if I could ever find my way back—the first two years of this partnership did yield results, but somehow I did not feel fulfilled. I was feeling unbalanced, disoriented, and lost. I needed to find my path and I needed to reclaim my values, goals, and purpose.

### **Vignette 8: Niño Perdido (Lost Child)**

*Sólo soy un niño perdido  
En la estación  
No sé hacia donde te has ido  
Qué dirección  
Déjate llevar  
Déjate llevar*

*I was lost, and I needed some direction. I felt like a lost child looking for a path. I lost myself, and I lost my bearings—my purpose. What should I do and where should I go? These were the thoughts that lingered and echoed within my head.*

*Sólo soy un niño perdido  
No hay nadie más  
Dicen que después de la herida  
No hay vuelta atrás  
Déjate llevar  
Déjate llevar*

*Could I find my way back to the gardens that were filled with vibrant colors and beauty? Was it too late? Was I so naïve? Was I a lost child too afraid to admit that the*

*approaches utilized by my partner were best for our school? The questions and doubts in my head were like an endless vortex that continuously had me spinning out of control, looking for validation and wondering if my thoughts on education and schooling were contrived and detached from the reality of what students needed.*

*Pero creo que ya no puedo más  
Que no...  
Que sólo soy, sólo soy  
Un niño y nada más  
Que no...  
Que alguien me cierre el telón  
Que ya echo de menos tu voz*

*I was lost and adrift. I was hurt and trying to console myself. I was feeling like a child who was injured and alone. I had lost my voice.*

*Déjate llevar  
Déjate llevar  
Déjate llevar*

*~ Soler, A. (2018). Niño Perdido [Recorded by A.Soler]. On Mar de Colores [Spotify]. Location: Universal Music Group. (2018)*

*I had to let myself go to grow. I needed to seek leadership in other areas. I approached my superintendent and notified her that I was enrolled in a doctoral program and was seeking additional opportunities for leadership positions. With each new opportunity, I began to refocus and remember who I was and what I could provide. Throughout two years, I worked as a building principal and took on various assignments at the district level. With each task, I was seeking voice and direction. I was looking to make a difference. I was looking for an opportunity to lead and believe once again in myself. I was seeking to support our school district and attempting to see if my beliefs and ideas were still viable. I was trying to find the lost child who wandered into the*

*fields of a corn maze and did not realize he was lost. I was seeking myself. In the end, I wanted to find a new leadership position, but I was unsure if I had made the growth necessary.*

*My desire for personal and professional growth led me to consider different leadership opportunities within the district. I began to work directly with the central office and superintendent on a district-wide evaluation of the dual language programs, strategic planning to address the projected enrollment within the district, and supported the public-private venture supporting the construction of military housing development within the community. These different leadership opportunities led me to consider additional opportunities outside of the district. To pursue that opportunity, I decided to ask my superintendent for a letter of recommendation.*

*The letter of recommendation began, Art has fulfilled a number of roles in the seven years during which we have worked together. In many instances, he has been the “go-to” administrator whose jobs responsibilities have morphed based on the needs of the district. His past background as bilingual speech pathologist provided a solid foundation for his administrative work at both the building and central office levels. I have been consistently impressed with Art’s desire to learn, to try new approaches, and his collaborative spirit. His assistant principal and principal positions were in our largest and most diverse elementary school. His facility with Spanish and knowledge of the Hispanic culture was often and continues to be an asset. His understanding of school improvement process is a valuable resource to our district. His building was in status under NCLB standards, and he participated in the successful efforts to move the school into a positive adequate yearly progress classification, The skills that are evident in Art’s*

*work are prerequisites for success in both central office and building level administration. Art has operated as a collaborative leader, soliciting the opinions of others as he works to build consensus among diverse individuals and groups. He values the contributions of all and treats others in a respectful and dignified manner. His approach is a model for working with diversity in the workplace. Art also understands the importance of education for every child. This is evident in his referenced school improvement efforts. He understands the development of data sets to assist in decision making and the value of using data in a district's Response to Intervention efforts. I have every confidence that Art Abrego will provide outstanding service and leadership in any school district that would be fortunate enough to employ him. He is a pragmatic leader who would enhance a school district with his experience and know-how. I am confident in his expertise and know he will continue a pattern of achievement in his career.*

### **Reflection on Vignette 8**

As I compare the comments on the letter of recommendation with my initial evaluation, I am very honored, humbled, and happy. I do not doubt that the challenges and experiences within this leadership structure provided me with the opportunity to collaborate, co-plan, and create educational goals and instructional initiatives with an equal partner. It provided me with a chance to learn about my profession in an environment that was also safe, supportive, and structured to meet my personal needs. It was an educational experience that allowed reflection and provided me with an opportunity to discuss my educational perspectives with another educational leader.

I will admit that it was a journey that caused me to question my leadership abilities and my educational beliefs. However, it was also provided with an opportunity

to look into the mirror. It allowed my vulnerabilities to be exposed, questioned my thoughts, and caused me to recommit and reconfirm to my beliefs and values. This journey, as with all voyages, began at home and led me back home. The ability to be critically reflective provided me the opportunity to look deep within myself to determine not only who I am, but also to reclaim my authentic and real leadership approach.

According to Shamir and Eilam (2005), authentic leaders have clarity on who they are, what they believe, and what they value. Specifically, Shamir and Eilam (2005) explained that authentic leaders are portrayed as

possessing self-knowledge and a personal point of view, which reflects clarity about their values and convictions. They are also portrayed as identifying strongly with their leadership role, expressing themselves by enacting that role, and acting on the basis of their values and convictions. Any discussion of authentic leader development has to focus on how these characteristics are developed. (p. 396)

Shamir and Eilam (2005) asserted that the central aspect of fostering an honest and solidified self-concept is a critical factor in determining and establishing authentic leadership, and our self-concept is nurtured through our stories: “It is through life experiences and the way they are organized into life-stories that people can develop a self-concept of a leader that supports and justifies their leadership role because the life-story not only recounts but also justifies” (p. 403).

According to Shamir and Eilam (2005), life-stories provide us not only with essential facts, but more importantly, provide us with essential and underlying answers about who we are and why we exist. Shamir and Eilam (2005) specifically pointed out that,

self-knowledge in terms of a life-story provides the authentic leader with self-concept clarity because it organizes life events into a gestalt structure that establishes connections between those events so that the person’s life is experienced as a coherent unfolding process. (p. 402)

I know who I am as a person and as a leader. I am an educational leader who has the skills and knowledge of an industrial farmer, but I apply them cautiously as I attend to my garden.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to articulate a personalized account of the co-principal leadership model and demonstrate the power of self-reflection as it relates to self-discovery and leadership development. I provided an intimate account of my experiences within this model through the use of vignettes to provide a reflective as well as a transparent window which individuals can utilize to gauge their respective journeys of leadership individually or collaboratively with others. According to Shamir and Eilam (2005) “life-stories provide authentic leaders with a self-concept that can be expressed through the leadership role. . . . and provide the leader with knowledge and clarity about their values and convictions” (p. 395).

My experience with the co-principalship role was examined to identify the strengths, challenges, benefits, and effects associated with this leadership model. In this study, the research questions were:

- How do culture, ethnicity, and gender impact an educational leader, particularly within the configuration of the co-principalship?
- What were the circumstances that prompted our school district to pursue this leadership structure?
- What were the fundamental leadership challenges I experienced in the role of a co-principalship?

- How were responsibilities delineated and distributed within this structure?  
How were decisions made within this structure and how were conflicts resolved?
- How were relationships with the parents and teachers of our school established and maintained within this leadership structure?
- How did this experience facilitate my development of characteristics associated with effective leadership?
- What are the primary planning, implementation, and monitoring recommendations for school districts to consider when implementing this leadership structure?

The answers to these questions shape this conclusion as well as the answer to this study's primary question concerning the benefits and challenges involved in the implementation of a co-principal model.

### **How Do Culture, Ethnicity, and Gender Impact An Educational Leader, Particularly Within the Configuration of the Co-Principalship?**

The stories within this research study provide a snapshot of my lived experience as a first-generation Hispanic male and building principal in a co-principal leadership structure. I sought to demonstrate the power of self-reflection in the overall professional and personal development of an educational leader. It was only when I wrote these vignettes that I genuinely recognized how sacrifices, culture, language, and my search for identity influenced my view of education and my experience within the co-principalship structure and allowed me to rediscover my belief in my leadership abilities. Shamir and Eilam (2005) argued that “authentic leadership rests heavily on the self-relevant

meanings the leader attaches to his or her life experiences, and these meanings are captured in the leader's life-story" (p. 395).

For my parents, their obligations and circumstances as children forced them to quit school and fortified their determination to immigrate to this country to provide hope and opportunity to their children. My parents left their country, culture, and community to begin a new journey where they had to navigate their way through different obstacles and opportunities designed to provide a new life for our family. Our culture, language, and community were celebrated and cultivated through the endless stories that my mother told us. Her stories were designed to connect us to our past and to cement our future in this country based on the principles and beliefs that guided her throughout her life. Her stories centered on obstacles that were confronted by her and my father, their respective families, and how determination, faith, and perseverance were founded and reinforced by their character and the obligations they had to family and their community.

I am the son of immigrants. As a child of immigrants, the only obligation I had to my family was to complete my schooling. I work within the field of education to honor the sacrifices that were made by my parents, and I see those same sacrifices in the faces of the parents that I serve within our schools.

The lessons that I learned from my mother's stories are woven into my soul and have been guideposts that are threaded through the vignettes presented here. These stories create a dynamic tapestry of personal and professional development composed of and strengthened by culture, language, memories, emotions, and love. The compelling fabric of my life continuously grows and is reshaped through new experiences that form new threads, that strengthen and tighten weaves, or releases the tension on the loom. The

tapestry of my life is also continuously reshaped through reflection. Self-reflection and lived experiences provide the process in which life experiences can allow individuals the opportunity to create a life that is dynamic, daunting, and dexterous.

I chose to work within a co-principal leadership structure to honor the sacrifices of the diverse families that I served and to create a community that honors sacrifice, embraces obligations, and believes in a future based on hope.

Bordas (2013) posited that Latino leaders use four distinct practices that link the past, present, and future and allow leaders to unite the community:

1. the power of a shared vision,
2. the power of history and cultural traditions,
3. *compartir*—the power of participation and shared responsibility, and
4. *paso a paso*—the power of a step-by-step approach where each success reinforces abilities and self-confidence. (p .8)

Many of these families made enormous sacrifices to be in this country and were seeking a new life for themselves and their children. Many of the families that I served pledged their lives to ensure our freedom. All the families that I served wanted a better future for their children. I felt a connection and obligation to serve. I understood through my own lived experiences that cooperation, collaboration, and a united approach were essential for success. As I reflect upon the vignettes within this research paper, I recognize the influence that my family and culture had within this partnership. It has always been an obligation to serve and honor the sacrifices of others.

Developing a healthy relationship with your partner is a crucial component within the co-principal leadership structure. Eckman (2006) clearly outlined that the ability to

communicate, collaborate, and cultivate collegiality is fundamental to developing a unified vision of education and provides each partner an opportunity for continuous self-reflection on that vision. It is this aspect of reflection coupled with the life stories of my cultural and familial experiences that have impacted me professionally and personally and shaped my view of education.

### **What Were the Circumstances That Prompted Our School District to Pursue This Leadership Structure?**

Various factors influenced the development of a co-principalship leadership structure within my school district. At the forefront, school districts were in an educational environment swimming in a sea of acronyms associated with The No Child Left Behind Act. The underlying pressures created by school ranking, subgroup performance on standardized test scores, and schools being identified either as making adequate yearly progress or as failing were intense. According to Schoen and Fusarelli (2008), the issue of fear was rampant across schools:

The greater the consequences for not attaining testing goals, the more threatening and high pressure the school or district becomes as a work environment. High-stakes environments create a single-minded focus on avoiding sanctions, accompanied by a fear to attempt anything new or untried. Fear, directly or indirectly emanating from NCLB, can become pervasive in schools and can dictate where educators are willing to invest their time and attention. (p. 192)

The availability of an equal partner to discuss issues and to problem solve challenges has reduced the stress levels on educational leaders and has often had a positive impact on their performance (Brown & Feltham, 1997; Chirichello, 2003; Eckman, 2006).

Schools across the country identified as not making adequate yearly progress were provided support to address issues associated with test performance and

achievement gaps with various subgroups. The support provided to schools included additional resources for tutoring sessions, materials, or providing students the opportunity to relocate to schools that were not underperforming.

The district's response to provide an additional educational leader through the formation of the co-principalship was in part a reaction to NCLB. But I also believe the new structure was meant to support me as the newly hired principal. Upon reflection, I knew that the school district and superintendent wanted me to grow and succeed within the school district. The inclusion of an additional educational leader provided me an opportunity to learn, teach, lead, and follow. It allowed me the chance to see another leader address educational issues, meet with staff, and connect with community members. It provided me the opportunity to consult, collaborate, and co-lead initiatives for our school district. It offered me a chance to see another person lead and to look at myself as a leader in a new light. The co-principalship provided me an opportunity to reflect upon my beliefs and rededicate myself to my commitment to growth and learning for all students.

### **What Were the Fundamental Leadership Challenges Experienced in the Role of a Co-Principalship?**

Although I was not directly involved with the development of the plan, I understood that the success of the co-principalship structure in my school district would be directly based on my ability to embrace this concept and to work on creating a learning environment where communication, collaboration, and co-leadership were entirely on display for all of our stakeholders. I also was fully aware that for this partnership to succeed, it was essential that I be open and accepting of change.

When I began writing this dissertation, I thought that the most central leadership challenge that I faced as a co-principal centered on working with another leader to nurture and develop a united community in an environment that was being challenged and divided based on the sanctions that were being imposed by NCLB. I always believed that the development of the co-principalship was solely decided upon as a response to the issues of NCLB.

However, throughout the writing process, I began to recognize that personally and professionally, the development of the co-principalship position within my school district was formulated by the superintendent and other central office administrators to not only address the impact of NCLB, but to also support my professional and personal development.

Tomlinson (2004) claimed that what is central to personal and professional growth is the willingness to accept “the self” (p. 2). According to Tomlinson (2004), “the self has an existence with distinctive traits or characteristics and is related to your identity, a basis for your self-esteem, self-confidence, self-respect and self-regard” (p. 3). Shamir and Eilam (2005) held that the central aspect of fostering an honest and solidified self-concept is a critical factor in determining and establishing authentic leadership and our self-concept is nurtured through our stories.

What I did not initially recognize was that the most daunting issue that I would confront centered on critically reviewing my leadership skills, educational beliefs, insecurities, and vulnerabilities. When my partnership initially began, I accepted all suggestions for change and was very eager to implement new initiatives within the building. I was keenly aware that it was essential that the implementation of these

initiatives needed to be embraced and celebrated so that we could solidify our partnership and demonstrate our integrated approach as we addressed our challenges. We made significant growth, and with each testing session, we made a substantial increase in our overall test scores on ISAT and IMAGE.

However, with each passing year, I began to realize that the approaches we were taking to achieve the improved results on standardized tests were in direct conflict with my fundamental beliefs about education. I was and continue to be a firm believer in bilingual education and the promise that dual language approaches hold for the educational success of our emergent bilingual learners. The emergence of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency is directly impacted by how educators support students in the development of academic language and the development of their native language. Although we were demonstrating growth in test scores, the ways we were getting there conflicted with my beliefs about what Hispanic students in particular need to retain their native language and become proficient in the English language. In the end, I learned that a foundation of leadership must be based on fidelity to one's ideas and keeping commitments based on one's values. I believe that the most significant challenge I had in this experience was to embrace the opportunity to reflect and grow as a person and a professional. This introspection and the ability to critically self-reflect led to self-acceptance and facilitated my self-understanding personally and professionally. Shamir and Eilam (2005) explained that effective leaders possess self-knowledge and a personal point of view which reflect clarity about their values and convictions and solidify their leadership.

## **How Were Responsibilities Delineated and Distributed and How Were Decisions Made and Conflicts Resolved?**

Eckman (2006) acknowledged that the co-principalship model is one way for districts to address issues related to school management and address the complex issues of raising student achievement (p. 49). The responsibilities outlined within this co-principalship were delineated and drafted by the superintendent. Specifically, I was to address the special education and management of the building. My partner was to be the head instructional leader. However, as with any relationship, the actual implementation of the partnership was as intricate, delicate, and complex as any marriage. Court (2003) explained how the leadership structure within the co-principalship can vary:

- **Supported Dual Leadership:** Two principals share some leadership duties and divide other responsibilities according to their strengths. They delegate additional tasks to other staff members.
- **Job-Share Co-Principalship:** Two people alternate working part time together to fulfill the obligations of the principalship.
- **Split Task Dual Leadership:** Both co-principals work together full time to address the responsibilities of the office of the principal. One of the principals approaches the administrative tasks of the office, and the other addresses the issues associated with instructional leadership.
- **Integrative Co-Principalship:** The distribution of all work is flexible, with no predetermined roles. Each professional incorporates equal responsibility for administrative and instructional leadership tasks. (p. 162)

We were educational leaders charged with cultivating a cohesive community focused on achievement and growth for all of our students. There were times where we

worked in unison to complete projects, and there were times when we worked independently. However, the most successful projects were those that aligned with both of our fundamental beliefs and values. We did not always agree on a particular approach, and in those times we strived to have those discussions in private. The constructive conflict between two people in a partnership is a component of any relationship.

Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Perez (2003) recognized that “conflict is a natural part of collective human experience and in our efforts to cooperate with one another, we have differences of opinion about how best to accomplish our common goals” (p. 782). Uline et al. (2003) added that “people in organizations often avoid or suppress conflict because they fear uncontrollable consequences resulting from a lack of self-efficacy and skills to manage the conflict constructively” (p.785).

I believe that constructive conflict is essential to a healthy relationship and collaboration. Exploring the nature of conflict is difficult. Uline et al. (2003) stipulated that

Conflict, though often unsettling, is a natural part of collective human experience. It can leave participants ill at ease, so it is often avoided and suppressed. Yet conflict, when well-managed, breathes life and energy into relationships and can cause individuals to be more innovative and productive. (p. 782)

Constructive conflict is a component that leads to personal and professional exploration and growth. The essential development of personal and professional growth fortifies leadership development.

### **How Did this Experience Facilitate My Development of Characteristics Associated with Effective Leadership?**

According to Shamir and Eilam (2005), clarity on who you are, what you believe, and what you value fosters effective and real leadership. In the end, the most crucial aspect of constructive conflict is that it can lead to self-reflection. I struggled

professionally when some of our initiatives conflicted with my values and beliefs. I have come to realize that these internal struggles were the most difficult but also yielded the most significant growth for me personally and professionally. Walubwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) described how organizations and leaders are positively impacted by following their true values: “When organizational leaders know and act upon their true values, beliefs, and strengths, while helping others to do the same, higher levels of employee well-being will accrue and positively impact follower performance” (p. 91). Shamir and Eilam (2005) identify four components that fortify leadership that are directly related to knowing one’s values and are directly related the positive development of self:

1. development of a leader identity as a central component of the person’s self-concept;
2. development of self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, including clarity about values and convictions;
3. development of goals that are concordant with the self-concept; and
4. increasing self-expressive behavior, namely consistency between leader behaviors and the leader’s self-concept. (p. 399)

As I reflect upon this experience and write this dissertation, I am flooded with personal and professional memories that fill me with joy and peace, knowing that each of those moments created a resolve within me that the most critical and significant choices I make should always align with my values and commitments

## **How Were Relationships with Parents and Teachers Established and Maintained?**

My partner and I were determined to create a leadership structure that would focus on supporting our staff, students, and parent community; the fundamental components that supported this commitment centered on communication, collaboration, and collegiality. Eckman's (2006) survey study noted that one of the major obstacles to address was teacher and parent communication:

The weakness that was identified most frequently was the perception of the co-principals that they were "being played off one another." Several co-principals described parents and teachers who would see one of the team members as "stricter" or would contact the co-principal with whom they were most comfortable. (p. 12)

It was essential that we were viewed as a team and that our decisions were seen as reflecting our commitment towards our school community goals. Eckman's 2006 study also noted that this perception of a united team was at the forefront of the group of co-principals participating in the study: As a group these co-principals were satisfied with the model, but they were cognizant of the difficulties inherent in sharing their power and their positions. The respondents in Eckman's (2006) study identified problems in communicating, defining responsibilities, developing trust, and presenting a unified front (p. 16).

The partnership I became committed to was initially established at our first community meeting, and we strived to create a united partnership focused on student growth and achievement. Initially, I deferred to my partner and supported the development of initiatives designed to increase standardized scores in the area of reading and math. However, as I began to find my voice and refocused my actions and decisions based on my beliefs, I began to question the focus on discrete skill development.

However, I did not want to disrupt or interfere with my partner's ability to provide the instructional leadership to the school. Instead, I began to search for opportunities at the district level that would expand my leadership skills and offer me opportunities to embrace newly found confidence.

### **What Are the Primary Planning, Implementation and Monitoring Recommendations When Implementing This Leadership Structure?**

#### **Planning**

Thomson and Blackmore (2006) reviewed the central elements of a successful co-principalship and indicated that in designing this role, “existing resources must be critically examined so that the work of reshaping and remaking does not simply reproduce undesirable process/product” (p. 2). If there is a current principal in the position, that person should be fully involved in every aspect of creating the structure.

Thomson and Blackmore (2006) cautioned that the “professional support and formation for principals should be differentiated to suit the varying models of principalship and the needs and experience of the individuals” (p. 3). In my experience, this was a concept that was presented to me for consideration. I was not involved in planning the position or structuring responsibilities. I was involved in the interview process, but the final decision of hiring for the position was with the superintendent. The formation of this structure within my school district was designed to address and support the needs of our community and to support my leadership development.

#### **Funding**

The hiring of two school principals is typically more expensive for a school district to implement. I maintained my salary and my partner was hired at the same salary level. The additional cost associated with this type of leadership structure may be difficult

to calculate. Grubb and Flessa (2006) acknowledged that although the cost of an additional principal within the building will be added cost to the budget of any school district, the essential benefits may be difficult to calculate. Specifically, Grubb and Flessa (2006) suggested that school districts may need to reconsider leadership cost in a different way:

Overall, then, there are potentially substantial benefits of unconventional principalships—not, to be sure, in forms that can be linked to test scores or student progress just yet, but in ways that arguably affect a school’s effectiveness. The calculation of benefits and costs clarify that it may be necessary to think of administrative costs in different ways. (pp. 538–539)

Our partnership had a significant impact on our school related to test scores and responding to the sanctions associated with NCLB. This partnership also had a significant impact on my leadership abilities, and it helped me redefine my authentic leadership approach.

### **Responsibilities**

School districts should consider the educational and professional experiences of the individuals who are involved in this collaborative structure. Court (2003) explained how the leadership structure within the co-principalship can vary:

- **Supported Dual Leadership:** Two principals share some leadership duties and divide other responsibilities according to their strengths. They delegate additional tasks to other staff members.
- **Job-Share Co-Principalship:** Two people alternate working part time together to fulfill the obligations of the principalship.
- **Split Task Dual Leadership:** Both co-principals work together full time to address the responsibilities of the office of the principal. One of the principals

approaches the administrative tasks of the office, and the other addresses the issues associated with instructional leadership.

- Integrative Co-Principalship: The distribution of all work is flexible, with no predetermined roles. Each professional incorporates equal responsibility for administrative and instructional leadership tasks. (p. 162)

In my experience, each of us had previous experience as building principals in very diverse schools which provided us both the opportunity to utilize financial and personnel resources that would significantly impact our students and their families.

### **Compatibility**

The concept of compatibility may be one of the most challenging areas to consider, and I may not be able to determine this to its fullest extent. My partner and I were extremely different. I was a bilingual and bicultural learner and the son of immigrants. My partner did not have the same type of cultural and immigrant experiences that I had that were reflective of my family or of the families that we served.

My partner and I were both bilingual, and both of us had extensive experiences as bilingual educators. However, my partner's expertise in bilingual education was based on an early exit model designed to transition students from native language instruction to English language instruction as soon as possible. I was involved in the development and expansion of the dual language program within our school district. The continuous development of two languages, which is a reflective and foundational component of dual language programming, impacts the overall achievement of students. However, the results of that development are typically not seen for five to seven years, because the cognitive academic language proficiency skills of students are being developed in two

languages. Annual yearly progress that was the fundamental construct of NCLB was in direct conflict with the principles of dual language programming and contrary to everything I believed in as an educator.

Shamir and Eilam (2005) identified how personal life-stories and ideological beliefs can formulate and solidify leadership development and core commitments:

Life-stories of leadership development as the finding of a cause often combine a personal story with a collective story of a movement. These stories present leadership development in terms of developing identification with a movement and a cause and finding a sense of direction through the development of a political or ideological outlook. (p. 405)

Masters (2013b) elaborated extensively on the need for co-principals to have similar and coherent points of view as these relate to education and schooling, and it is essential that the partnership be rooted:

Given the need for such high degrees of commonality of philosophy and complementarity of working styles, finding the right co-principal requires considerable discernment and also a period of formation prior to taking up the appointment. The possible candidates need to spend enough time together to allow for evaluation of compatibility. (p.105)

Our commitment and passionate determination to see our students succeed were at the forefront our partnership. However, that determination and passion must be based on similar educational philosophies. As I have outlined, the fundamental structure of this partnership allowed me the opportunity to refocus and solidify my educational beliefs which conflicted with the approaches that were being utilized to address the use of standardized scores to determine the success of schools.

### **Collaboration**

The structure of co-principalship is based on the premise of a productive collegial and collaborative relationship. Starr (2010b) emphasized that at the forefront for a

productive relationship is open and honest communication that provides a framework for success:

Partners would need to have complete trust in each other, have complementary skills, be collaborative team players, and open and full communication would be critical. There would need to be agreement about what should be done, how it should be done and when it should be done. Tasks and timelines would be important in coordinating the work. (p. 20)

As with any relationship, there will be ample time for celebrations and development of traditions. However, there will also be some challenges, disagreement, and misunderstandings. The Catholic Secondary Principals Australia (2017) published an article on co-principalships that indicated that trust and collaboration were necessary for success:

In a collaborative leadership model you need to have a high level of trust, be willing to listen, be open to other perspectives and have open, honest dialogue with one another. It is also important that both parties strongly believe in the value and strength of a shared leadership model. (para. 13)

How the partners choose to address these issues is the cornerstone of the success of this leadership configuration. If the decision is to ignore the concerns or to solve the problems in a very unproductive, confrontational manner, this intimate relationship may develop festering frustrations and the problems may become irreconcilable.

### **The Pivotal Learning: The Garden Can Bloom Again**

I cherished my experience as a co-principal. I learned to lead from this experience, and I also learned how important it is to support others in leadership positions. I was involved in this leadership position for three years. Over those three years, I was able to find my voice as a leader and understand that my beliefs and commitments are only truly fulfilled through conviction and reflection. I had a very fulfilling experience within this leadership structure. I also learned that what I value in

education goes beyond the annual summative assessments published in the local papers. I am a gardener who toils the soil with tenacity and determination but is acutely aware that the purpose of education and my leadership approach go beyond just reaping the harvest; the fulfillment lies within the nourishment and beauty of the garden itself.

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