

1

Changing The School Culture: The Community Activist

Instilling a sense of pride, respect, and hope for students, faculty, and community is the focus of this chapter. How can students be reoriented to think they are cared for and capable when schools have been unsupportive throughout their school experiences? How can teachers begin to contribute their talents and energies to schools that have been unresponsive and authoritative in the decision-making process? What are effective strategies that can be utilized by principals to meet students and faculty where they are in order to change a school and create a healthful and positive environment?

Themes addressed in this chapter:

- Creating school pride
- Developing shared decision making
- Acknowledging success
- Overcoming obstacles and roadblocks
- Remaining positive and projecting leadership stability
- Being consistent

4 Elementary School

Profile of the Community Activist

Principal: female

Age: 45+

Ethnicity: Latina

Experience: 1st-year principal; one year as intern assistant principal; 3 years related administrative experience

School: elementary; student population: 500

We were standing around talking, speaking Spanish, and finally ended up talking about why the kids in our school were not succeeding . . . really a very deep dialogue. It happens all the time. People come and sit in my office and they comment, "When have I ever done this?"

These kids don't have a tomorrow. The cost of failure is so high. It's so urgent. It's a whole prison population is what it is. I struggle with that every day.

I often ask the mom what type of support she has for her child so I can advocate for her. She may be a single mom or whatever, so I continually ask what I can do to help. Half the time when I stay late, I call parents and I make it a point of telling them something that their child did that was good.

I love this job. People ask me how I feel. I tell you that I love it. I absolutely love it. People are so surprised! Well, you know . . . I consider myself a very positive, natural, "organic" person and personality. But I really do love it. I've taken to it like a fish to water. However daunting this school is and as much as I had great reservations initially, I am in the right place.

School Context

All new principals have the daunting responsibility of providing effective leadership relevant to their constituents, while, at the same time, first learning about their school needs. This is a very complex dichotomy for any new leader and requires immediate yet measured action. On one hand, a leader must move deliberately so that she can make thoughtful and effective decisions; on the other hand, she must be immediately responsive to the situation. First impressions are quite powerful and affect perception, which can remain for a long period of time. Our newly hired principal in this elementary school assumed the principalship from a principal who was unable to relate to her parent community and was unresponsive to her faculty, causing considerable resistance.

The school was in an inner-city environment where crime rates were high and drugs and gang-related problems were prevalent. This was her first position as principal. Prior to this assignment, she had been an administrative

intern in a high-achieving school with a very seasoned and successful principal as her model.

School Characteristics

The school consisted of approximately 500 students: 60% Latino; 33% African American; 6% Samoan; 1% Chinese, and a few others. On an API (Academic Performance Index) scale it was a 1/1 school, the lowest academic rating. The school achieved the lowest absolute test scores as well as the lowest scores relative to those with similar demographics.

School Climate

The previous administrator was extremely unprepared to deal with the considerable needs of the school. She was also very concerned about safety issues and made decisions that greatly restricted access to the school by the faculty and school community in order to provide a more secure environment. Upon her assignment to the school, she had requested that she not be placed in this administrative position and be transferred to another school. Her request was refused by the district office. There was considerable antipathy between her and the school personnel.

School Organization

The school district had a student population formula that would provide administrative support, such as an additional assistant principal, if there were a sufficient number of students. With an attendance of approximately 500, the school would have been assigned an additional administrator. But this elementary school had fewer than the minimum number of students, so only one administrator, the principal, was responsible for the oversight of the school.

Interview

The following interview was conducted during the principal's 1st week on the job.

Dubin:

Could you tell me a little about your background, preparation, and training?

Principal:

Well, I was trained as a bilingual teacher. That was my initial teaching credential. I worked as a teacher for about 15 years in a large unified school

6 Elementary School

district. As a teacher, I always took a leadership role in my school. One year, my principal was sick and I assumed the TSAP (teacher serving as principal) position for that year and served for 2 years as principal/administrator. Then the district started the internship administrative program, and they begged me to and insisted that I enroll, although I really wanted to go back into my classroom. I was placed in a school with 500 children in a very high-performing school, one of the highest-performing schools in the city. It served extremely well in terms of my training. . . . In fact, while I was there I didn't realize what training I was getting. But now that I am an administrator and have been placed in one of the lowest-performing schools in California, I can see that last year's training was really influential.

This is my 1st year, not as a principal intern, but as the principal. I stand alone.

Dubin:

Tell me about the school you are currently in.

Principal:

Certainly. It is 60% Latino, 33% African American, which leaves approximately 7% Samoan, Chinese kids, and very few others. There are close to 500 children. On an API (academic performance index) scale it is a 1/1 school. That is the lowest possible score. The first category is academic, but the second category is a matched score with similar schools, that is, similar composition, parent education, student population, etc. That is the more distressing score. I'm far more concerned about that score than the academic one because there are many schools which achieve a 1 academically, but the second score compares us to similarly ranked schools, yet we're still a 1.

We have mostly black and brown children, a strong bilingual program, strong teachers. There are more National Board teachers in my school than any other school in the city and six more are going to qualify, or starting the process to become nationally certificated. I'm really thrilled about that. The staff is deeply committed, but it's a hard population of kids. They are bused in and are the product of a very compromised life situation. They're melting down. They're really melting down. Not only must I deal with the overwhelming number of children, but as the only site administrator I must manage a lot of staff: 36 certificated teachers, 10 paraprofessionals, special education, the list goes on and on. There are just so many people.

Dubin:

In light of this being your 1st year, although as you've indicated you've had some experience, what would you say your priorities are for this year (this being within the context of the 1st month of the school year)?

Principal:

It's interesting because my priorities certainly shift from week to week. I have to give you a little more background on what has happened in this school in order to understand my priorities. This is a school that has had a high teacher-turnover rate. That is one of the problems with underperforming schools. It's called a STAR school, if they're at that underperforming level. One of the unfortunate characteristics with STAR schools is that teachers do not stay. Hopefully, I have a group now that is committed and will be the majority. But one of the other problems is consistent leadership. They've had three or four different principals in the past 5 years; three in the last 3 years. The last principal, before me, was placed here 2 days before school opened. She hated it and went to her supervisors and asked to get out of the school within 2 days of working. They refused her. The staff really disliked her (perhaps hated, although that is a strong word). It was horrible. She did things . . . well, let me explain.

It's in a marginal neighborhood; day laborers up and down the street. She had a different background from this population, not Latina or African American. She was not used to the neighborhood. Before school opened, she went into the school before the teachers came back from summer break and changed all the locks. When they returned, the doors were completely locked, and throughout the year she never provided the teachers with a key. They were pretty much locked out for the whole year. They could only be there when she was there. They arbitrated. They went to the superintendent over and over. She even locked the front door of the school. The parents had to take their baby carriages to the back in order to enter. She maintained that it was for security purposes. There was such bad blood.

Dubin:

That gives me a better sense of what transpired prior to your interviewing for the job.

Principal:

Again, I did not want to interview for this school. I thought it was too big of a challenge for me to take a STAR school with 500 children with no assistant principal. Presently, I'm doing double, triple, quadruple the job my colleagues are doing. During the interview for an administrative position, I knew this was a possibility and I didn't want it. I was dismayed when I was offered the position, but the school insisted that they have me.

The superintendent agreed and supported the school request. So I walked into a situation where teachers were not treated professionally, nor with consistent leadership, for many, many years. All the previous principals have come down in a very heavy-handed way, top-down management: "It's 'my

8 Elementary School

way'; this is the way we do things." Well, the change for the people in the building has always been abrupt and hard.

Dubin:

So, with this incredible background and emotions so stark, how did you identify your priorities?

Principal:

My priority, therefore, has been to build community, although I do not see that changing much this year. They need trust; they need to feel that I trust them. I need to treat them like professionals, and this is a staff that really, really needs to feel like professionals again. They've been in such a bad situation.

The children were also aware of this. When I visited them in the spring last year, they knew of the problems with the principal. During the interview period and during my visits to the school, the children would run up and hug me and say, "Would you be our principal?" As you can imagine, it was very charged and emotional.

So it's really a process right now of building community. That is my focus, my overriding focus, for the year. It's not just building community for the teachers but for the students also. There must be an entire community enhancement regarding teaching and learning because they've been a fractured staff and student body.

Dubin:

That's a clear and focused response, and I appreciate how that need overrides everything else.

Principal:

Overrides everything else because I won't be able to do anything unless I can create that bond. And the first thing I did was to tell the teachers that I was here to stay. I told them that I would not leave after this year unless they take me out. I'm not leaving. I've made a commitment to stay for at least 3 years even though it's a great challenge. I come from the teaching ranks and have seen what happens to professionals. Listen, we're not paid very much, our worth anyway. But the one thing that can happen is that I can treat them like professionals. Over the years, these teachers went to conferences and paid for them by using their sick days. They wanted to learn. They wanted to improve. They made every effort on their own, without administrative support or acknowledgment. The place just wasn't run professionally. And that's my biggest priority.

There is, though, another important priority that focuses on teaching. I'm referring to the very low test scores. This school has been pounded on

the hand, over and over, to raise the scores . . . raise the scores. . . They keep throwing administrators in here to raise the scores. Well, one of the things that has happened in the school is that the teachers have been very conscientious and carved it down to needing to work on the basics, that is, reading, writing, and arithmetic. At the moment, they're just doing math and reading. We have three reading recovery teachers here, and unfortunately, but necessarily, everything else is falling by the wayside, for example, arts, music, science, social sciences. The end result is a concentration on improving test scores, but I feel that the soul of the school is missing.

Dubin:

So the whole psychology of the school is undergoing a metamorphosis.

Principal:

Yes. Let me say something else that may help to clarify my feelings.

Fun. The school is not fun. It's not that beautiful, wonderful place it should be. You just don't see that. So my second priority, not even second really, in addition to building trust is to build structures. Put things in place that give children success, something they can be successful at.

Dubin:

I see.

Principal:

I know that when they're failing at reading and failing at math and they have nothing else all day, they do not have a chance to be successful. One of the ways I'm dealing with this concept of fun is at recess or at lunchtime. I have five or six big soccer games going on or basketball games. And, let me tell you, I don't have nearly as many fights in the yards as before because they are being successful. I have to build in successes into their day so they have some hope so that when they finally get to reading and math they can successfully do something. I started a sing-along every 2 weeks; I get the entire school into the auditorium. We all sing together, and it's been very successful.

Something very interesting happened this past Friday. I had a teacher who used the sing-along as a punishment and decided not to bring her children to the auditorium. They were acting up, so she said that they couldn't come. It was the first time I used my administrative authority. I told the teacher that she could not use the sing-along session as a punishment. You can bench them, give them homework, "time-out" them, but not this. I knew that this one small thing, this singing together, was hitting so many bases. We are giving them something that they felt successful about, something they felt good about. We are creating community; we are creating a happy place.

10 Elementary School

I feel very strongly about this. I must give these children success and build community through school structures. And I'm trying to do this in every instance. Everything I can see . . . because these kids need to be successful at anything because they've been so unsuccessful. It's been such a downward spiral.

Dubin:

I understand the rationale behind it. You're trying to make it holistic and deal with the complete child. You're trying to provide the base that they unfortunately don't have.

Did you get back to that teacher and tell her what you were thinking?

Principal:

Yes. I told her that she was not to use the sing-along in this way. In retrospect, I may have been a bit abrasive, and she may have needed more of a rationale. Still, I went on to explain about the children's need for success, that we've got to have these things in place, and why she couldn't use the sing-along in this way. She understood, but let me add something about her. She is not a credentialed teacher. She's struggling with a highly impacted student population. But, nonetheless, she seemed to understand.

I thought about this exchange with her a lot. I haven't stopped thinking about it. I'll probably write a letter today (Sunday morning), asking to talk to her about it. I really do think she understood, but she also needs to understand the deeper issues involved with these children.

These kids live in the projects (lower-income housing), and I have often driven to their homes. I've been out there many times. It's abysmal where these kids are coming from. She needs to understand all of it.

Dubin:

I see. And so you are really trying to provide the foundation, giving these students support and also focusing on what might be helpful in reinforcing some of the academic expectations of the district.

In several ways you've stated how you're going about doing that. Could you tell me more about those strategies?

Principal:

One of the things that happens in a school like this relates to discipline. The school is so out of control that discipline almost becomes the curriculum. It becomes like a curricular task. When the teachers wrote their academic plan last year, discipline was their overriding focus, and it looked like a subject. It actually competed for funds and time. I'm very concerned

about that and how it can effect the time spent on academics. I was a good teacher and I know that discipline can really come through your curriculum. It does not have to be a subject unto itself. It should be embedded in the subject area. This school has struggled so hard with discipline it is competing as a curricular area. I need the teachers to look at differentiated instruction. They need to look at the population, in a cultural context, so that the techniques they use will be more relevant, for example, more hands-on, more kinesthetic, more time out of their seats.

The classes where I have the deepest concerns are where you have rows, rather than centers, and the children are looking directly at the teacher. The teacher is so worried about discipline and order and that everything could fall apart. As I mentioned, I'm trying to get rid of discipline as a curriculum. Recently, in this district, a new math adoption was accepted, and I'm trying to use it as a vehicle to train and refocus on instruction. Everyone has to be engaged in it. I also have an instructional reform facilitator; STAR schools receive such support. This is a person who encourages, models, and pushes curriculum. It's a perfect situation for me since I am a new person: an "open-door" principal. He's a peer, they respect him, and I'm using him as a vehicle to get the curriculum to the teachers. I can say that he and I have had discussions and we need to look at the standards, benchmarks anchored to the curriculum. This happens in all schools, even high-performing schools such as the one I had worked in last year.

Questions have been raised about whether the standards would be too hard for these kids. Well, at low-performing schools where students are two or three grade levels behind, it is understandable that questions will be raised asking whether or not the students are up to it. I have to constantly say that the students can do that; yes, they are able to attain those standards.

We had to differentiate the curriculum and scaffold and strategize to get those kids there. Now, we're not there yet because, as I said, we're analyzing the data. I do not know completely what the data will reflect, but we (the staff) need to pick one standard that we all can focus on, for example, math and/or reading, and hooking something to one standard and learn how to use the standard to anchor and develop benchmarks. I think it's a good strategy to work on just one.

But I must say that it is extremely difficult for me to handle it alone. I'm just so darn busy. While I understand this is my curriculum leadership role, I spend 15 to 16 hours per day doing something else that has to be done as opposed to curriculum leadership, which is what I love. I utilize three literacy specialists, and the upper grades are being trained on a very good reading program. Next year everyone will get it.

12 Elementary School

Dubin:

What about observations and evaluations of teachers?

Principal:

Unfortunately, at this school, no one's been evaluated in several years. I have 27 people to evaluate this year. Imagine, asking a new administrator. . . . My colleagues, that is, my friends who are principals, well they have about 12 or 13 people on their staffs and only one-third need to be evaluated. Twenty-seven people is a little overwhelming. But I am going to use the evaluation process for me to leverage some kind of coaching or instruction and focus on two to four different areas. I will focus on science and math. I see the evaluator role as a person like a lead teacher or expert teacher, a coach to help them see what their best teaching practices are or where they need to go. Constructive criticism, not a top-down approach. I'm going to take that tact because I have so many observations to do. I'll use this as another vehicle to focus on instruction.

You know, when I say that the kids have little in which they are successful, let me tell you, though, these kids are incredibly successful in science. Science units adopted in this district are all hands-on; they are super-engaging. I have never seen teachers use it properly and children not succeed and be engaged. It's the same concept as the assemblies I mentioned earlier. We have many manipulatives . . . those things that somehow became discarded in the past and those things I want to bring back. I want to ensure that these things are deeply embedded in the school day. You know, when I was in the high-performing school, that's exactly what I saw.

Dubin:

Let me step back for a second because you've raised so many important points that I want to touch upon. You mentioned that you have around 500 students in the school, and you're the only administrator.

Principal:

Can you believe it?

Dubin:

In light of this school and its history and its need, and you being identified as the person that they really wanted to provide the necessary leadership . . . and, as an example, one of your assignments is to evaluate the 27 staff this year, on and on, is there any way for you to negotiate with the district for additional support? You mentioned the curriculum

facilitator/collaborator as someone to talk with, but that seems almost happenstance, that is, the new textbook adoption and that's why that person is there. Is there any mechanism for you to be more supported in the light of this overwhelming task?

Principal:

No. This summer I wrote a letter to the superintendent, but unfortunately the school must have a population of approximately 500 children, and we fall beneath that number [$n=474$]. If we exceeded 500 children, we would be eligible for an administrative intern. I tell you, I wonder whether it would be good for me and/or good for an administrative intern training with a new administrator. It would not be the best spot for an intern. But I knew . . . another physical body . . . when I tell you I'm doing 14 to 16 hours a day on things other than visiting a teacher's classroom and dealing with curriculum. People line up at my office door . . . "Can I get a minute?" It's insane. It looks like a darn doctor's office. Let alone all the paper. No. There's no more support. There's no more support. There's no more I can do. I wrote a letter to the superintendent and I explained the situation regarding this under-performing school and that it's been a hellhole.

Listen. You see, the district went to a new budget based upon the per capita child. It's based upon what the child brings, so to speak. For example, if the child is a special education student, or English language learner, you get a certain amount of funding for each child. Now these funds used to be disbursed centrally, but now they're at site. It is the site decision to staff your school. So if you want an assistant principal, for example, you have to buy it out of your site money. Last year, the staff purchased another teacher to reduce class size for Grades 4 and 5. This was a very good strategy. On the other hand, I've spoken with middle school administrators who have two administrators; four counselors and have 500 kids. You can't believe it. Do you see what is going on?

Dubin:

Yes. I understand.

Principal:

And so I wrote a very impassioned letter. Unfortunately, it was ignored. I desperately need somebody else out here.

And even the physical plant. It's a three-story building. It's huge, immense. If anything were to affect my ability to remain in this job, it would be the physical demands from walking up and down these steps, 20 or 30

14 Elementary School

times a day. I tell you that my feet, the soles of my feet hurt, physically hurt, because of the building. In fact, that's what the last principal said.

Also, it's totally out of compliance. It does not have an elevator. I can't tell you how difficult it was handling the adoption of the new textbooks. It was the worst hell in the world. It is physically daunting just to move textbooks from floor to floor, and I'm here by myself.

Dubin:

So, in other words, this formula, which in one respect gives you the opportunity to make decisions, might be a good strategy, although there are so many needs it simply can't be spread around. Clearly, you need another administrator or someone who can assist you, yet it is understandable that getting another teacher to reduce class size is perfectly reasonable also.

Principal:

Absolutely. Both.

Dubin:

Let me ask you about this. The pressure is daunting. How do you deal with this personally, knowing the magnitude of the work?

Principal:

I love this job. People ask me how I feel. I tell you that I love it. I absolutely love it. People are so surprised! Well, you know . . . I consider myself a very positive, natural, "organic" person and personality. But I really do love it. I've taken to it like a fish to water. However daunting this school is and as much as I had great reservations initially, I am in the right place.

Dubin:

This is clear. Not only do you bring focus but also an expertise and a psychological balance that you really need to have for this kind of job. This is also what I was leading to for my next question. How do you make sure that you maintain this equilibrium and not be burned out because this is obviously a burn-out job with all the things that you've mentioned. And what would you say to another administrator, a new one, who would also be challenged in the same way you are?

Principal:

I would say to prioritize and have a backup plan. For example, there's no way I could do this in 8 hours. There's just no way to do my job in 8 hours, but I've decided to stay late, perhaps 1 or 2 nights. But I won't go in on

Saturdays or Sundays. That was something of a rule I established, although not a hard-and-fast rule. In fact, before school started this summer, I spent 30 consecutive days at school and many Saturdays. But it's just something I do want to adhere to. I mean I've stayed until 10 and 11 at night. Administrators are like that because at that hour they're alone and can get things done. But again, that's why you have to prioritize.

Also, for new administrators, I think it's important that they do something important for them. I leave my office and I know that things are not done. You do the things that you have to do: downtown paperwork that's due; you can't get behind on your deadlines. Some of it you just cut out, but it's really difficult to answer that question because I'm still a new administrator and learning. That's a question for a real seasoned person in a school like mine. What is it that they do?

I'll tell you that you must have a good emotional perspective. If you're a person who is a perfectionist and must get everything done and have things in order, well, it's not going to happen. It's not going to happen. You have to know that it's totally spontaneous, and when you get some things done, consider it a real accomplishment.

Dubin:

You've really answered the question well. You've identified that you must set up priorities and also that you can't have expectations that are unrealistic. You also must be able to walk away from the job even though it may be incomplete, and that it's OK.

Principal:

Yes.

Dubin:

What you've said is that there might be something we understand intellectually but emotionally may not be able to follow through on.

Principal:

Right. Right. Right. Right. Well, it doesn't feel good. I'm not young. I've had four kids and I understand this stuff. I can see how the district hires some young type-A guys, and they're in their offices every night until 11. They don't have the maturity to understand that you need to be flexible and roll with the punches. I think that raising my family gave me that. I learned that if something turned out a different way from what I thought and not as I expected, I managed. I do think it takes maturity more than anything in order to understand it emotionally and deal with it.

16 Elementary School

Dubin:

You're not saying anything that seasoned administrators, whom I've interviewed, aren't saying. You're really hitting the mark with that. In fact, one administrator mentioned that it's important to know yourself, having that maturity, a balanced perspective, knowing when to say no and yes. You're really restating much of what has been articulated by veteran administrators and supported in the literature.

Principal:

Good.

Dubin:

Let me ask you a question based upon your earlier comments about people lining up outside your office. You said that people are lined up outside your office and that's where you spend so much of your time troubleshooting, as opposed to some of the other areas such as instructional leadership. Why are they lined up? What is it that they need so urgently, and so many, that requires your immediate attention?

Principal:

The custodian needs to talk with me. I have two. They'll ask which one is to clean the cafeteria at 3, that it's so-and-so's job, not his. Someone else has to talk to me about keys, or someone needs to talk about someone's kids, or there's the SST or a parent wants to talk to me about not wanting her daughter drinking milk. I have mentioned that it is important that children drink milk. Then a teacher will want to talk to me about a mother who is driving her crazy and getting all the other mothers worked up. Or the new teacher needs to speak to me about her growth development plan. . . .

I'm trying to recreate my day this past Friday for you, to give you a little snapshot.

Dubin:

You've captured it very nicely.

On a different topic you alluded to when you talked about the district letter, when we talk about politics, would you consider the principalship to be a political position? If so, in what way?

Principal:

Hugely, hugely, hugely. It's political and so complex. It's political in so many arenas. For example, it's political with the community. Last year things were problematic with the administrator because she didn't speak

Spanish. This year because I speak Spanish I have better control over the kids, although it's not totally because I speak Spanish.

Also, there are many different constituencies, and so you have to politick. I suppose it's not different anywhere else. You have to work them. It's very political downtown. They are either with you or against you. They're with you if they see that you are working . . . also if they know you. There is the good old boy's network. Last year when I was the administrative assistant, my principal was able to get things done because they knew her, how she worked, and they did her favors. For me, I can't get a quarter of those things done because they don't know me. But I have another technique. I sort of throw myself on people's mercy with my openness and ask for help, ask them to visit my school and that I'll be so grateful.

I'm trying to work on my personality, but what politician doesn't?

Dubin:

In other words, knowing your constituencies, understanding their needs, and making inroads into the district as to how to get into that network as quickly as you can.

The other thing that you talked about earlier was isolation. That comes up often with experienced administrators and those first taking on this role. Could you speak a little bit to this feeling and that reality on a practical and emotional level? How do you deal with that?

Principal:

Well. I'm too busy to think about it right now. In my daily situation I'm too busy to actually think about it or worry about it. I'm just not feeling it. You know what I mean? I'm way too busy. There's a whole lot of stuff for me to know. It sort of has me in this wonderful spot. I don't know that there's a huge pressure coming down on me. I don't know who has the hammer in their hand because I'm new. I'm sort of learning things. It gives me a little break. As far as the loneliness, being a Latina helps and going into a school with this type of population with Latino teachers, going into a school where they desperately wanted me. I had the best situation of anybody in the sense that this was a school that was really messed over. Their previous administrators did not have the necessary skills, that is, writing, management. Fortunately, I have many of those skills. So that, combined with their really wanting me—my personality, my vision—these are people who are so much like me, that is, speaking Spanish. It was the perfect fit. They have envisioned an administrator like me, so they are incredibly cooperative, warm. They hang out in my office. I have a wonderful relationship with them all. As I mentioned, I have an instructional reform facilitator who I have a strong relationship with. I am not a top-down management person; I am very, very engaged.

18 Elementary School

Another thing. I try to visit every classroom as often as I can: twice a week. I have a notepad with me to give them feedback. By the time they come down to their mailboxes, I've already written comments to give them feedback, for example, the children are engaged, expectations you've communicated are clear, relevant, and so on. I'm trying to be encouraging. I'm trying to create the air of professionalism so that when we are working in other areas that require a commitment and focus, this is the groundwork to creating that responsibility. I say that word 10 times a day: professional. In this way the community is with me.

Dubin:

Yes. You are so connected with this community immediately, in their ability to relate to you and, in this context, your ability and sense that you can connect to them has provided a bond at the very beginning. This has placed that isolation on the side, which is somewhat unusual. That fit appears to be a very healthy thing.

Principal:

Yes. Absolutely. In fact, I was thinking of that this past Friday. We were standing around talking, speaking Spanish, and finally ended up talking about why the kids in our school were not succeeding . . . really a very deep dialogue. It happens all the time. People come and sit in my office and they comment, "When have I ever done this?" Well, a lot of this has to do with the fact that I'm Latina. You know. Especially with the parents, although the African American parents like me too, perhaps because I'm very direct. I often go over to their house. I drive right over to their house.

I'm very clear about my intentions and I communicate that to the parents. I speak very candidly, and I may be up in your face. "Understand, I'm advocating for you and your child." I understand. I tell them that I'm just as concerned for their child as they are. I often ask the mom what type of support she has for her child so I can advocate for the child. She may be a single mom or whatever, so I continually ask what I can do to help. Half the time when I stay late, I call parents and I make it a point of telling them something that their child did that was good.

You see, many of these problem students are around the office at the end of the day because of bus problems, whatever, and they're phoning their parents. This gives me an opportunity to tell them about their kids. If there was something that happened that was good, I tell this to the parents . . . "Calvin was exceptional today. He did everything right. I am so glad that he is here." You see, I know those parents only get the "negative" call over and over from schools that know that he is failing, know that he is acting badly.

It makes a difference and it makes a difference in my loneliness level. A few weeks ago I went to a dance with one of the teachers. Where I go my staff also goes. We're the same community. We always have been. That's making a big difference, a huge difference in terms of my loneliness.

Dubin:

Let me follow-up with a quick question: How sensitive/effective do you think you're going to be, or are thinking about, in providing the feedback to those whom you are obviously developing an unusual closeness with? Will it be difficult to be objective in order to help them develop in areas where they need to be stronger? Might that be a more delicate process when you need to tell a friend in a sense, but clearly someone working on behalf of the kids, that they need to improve?

Principal:

Yes. Absolutely. Already I have a teacher; someone who is a really nice guy; really great, but he could be a great teacher somewhere else.

Dubin:

Somewhere else?

Principal:

Yes. Somewhere else. You see, we're so impacted. You can't be a nice guy. There is no room for missionaries and nice people, nice guys, nice women. These kids don't have a tomorrow. The cost of failure is so high. It's so urgent. It's a whole prison population is what it is. I struggle with that every day.

But, let me tell you, emblazoned on my forehead is to always think about the children, think about the children. In this way, I can also say to the teacher who may not have the best teaching practices to take it off them, the teacher. The focus and driving force is the kid. Think about the children. We always need to think about the children and take them (the teachers) out of it. It makes it a lot easier for me if I keep in perspective why we are here. . . . It makes it easier for me to evaluate a teacher. It also makes it easier for them to hear it if I've put it in that perspective.

Dubin:

It's great and important that you have that kind of clarity. I would think that it is always important to hold onto that because there will be times when you'll be torn.

Let me ask you if there's anything else you'd like to add.

20 Elementary School

Principal:

Well, I would like to say that, about community, these children I'm working with are similar to my own children. I think that it's really, really important for there to be a match between the administrator and the school, just as I thought there should always be a match for a teacher.

In fact, I would often say to new teachers not to take the first job they're offered. They need to wait to get the job at the school they like. How many teachers talk about problems at the school or not liking the administrator? It's not like another job won't come. There is some picking and choosing. For an administrator it's so important to have that fit, to feel that there's a fit. That loneliness that we talked about. I could never have done this job if that staff had not stepped up to cooperate. I could not have figured out the schedules. I didn't know what they were talking about. I didn't understand the building. They were talking about the east yard and the west yard. They have cooperated the whole way because they want me; they're willing to help me through this. I think it's very important for there to be a fit because it won't function if there isn't.

The last administrator told me that she will never return to administration. She was always locked in her office, always locked in her office. Her staff didn't like her, the parents didn't like her, and the entire political thing with the district.

It's really important that there's an organic fit, but when there isn't, it's your first job to find things that have similarities, find places where there are commonalities. You need to find a way to bridge the community or the cultural gap, whatever it may be. I'd also like to say that you'll know when there's a fit. You'll feel it. The job will be easier to do. Your job will be easier to do.

Dubin:

Yes. That mutual need. Essentially, you're saying that we're all in this together and for the same reason. After, you need to deal with the issues, but you have to be at the same starting point. That's important to discern as you take that job.

Principal:

There's one other thing that is really disconcerting regarding the loneliness of the position. I'm evaluated on test scores, qualitative test scores. I need to identify that the school will raise its scores 15% with the African American population, for example. I'm evaluated on a very alien, disconnected

way as to what I'm actually doing at this school. And there's no one there to really tell me how I'm doing, except perhaps my secretary. And I'd like to hear it. I've always been a person who can hear that. The only reason I'm in leadership and am good at leadership is because I've always been willing to reflect and look at myself critically and push myself. That is part of my personality, part of my joy. I'm competitive with myself all the time and just like to push, not with other people, but with myself. How far can I go? How much can I change? How can I get my core beliefs moved further along in my life? It's a personal thing. But there's nobody there to tell me, ever, how it's working. So I have to look into people's faces. It's that politicking thing. I have to see. Do the kids look happy? Am I putting these things in place? Is it working? By sort of evaluating the entire situation, I internally evaluate myself. But that's a hard thing, not having anybody else. . . .

Dubin:

Yes, that's so important and it also speaks to the idea of isolation, that is, there is no one who is available to provide information, even basic information on how things function. The emotional component of simply having someone as a support person is a second component, and the third aspect is how you are doing to get some feedback that makes you feel that you are being successful. You believe you are, and you are strong enough and confident enough to have your own gauge, but everyone needs someone to say, "Good job."

Principal:

Yes. Last year, when I was mentored by a very effective administrator, working together, that was a situation where there was another intelligent person doing the exact same job. That was wonderful. We could talk to each other. But without having another person on my level . . . well, of course, I can network and I have meetings and such and that's the point of that. But it is really isolating. It's sort of serendipitous. I don't know all of my job description. Everything I do, you couldn't write it or explain it.

Dubin:

Thank you so much. You have covered the waterfront. I really appreciate the time you have taken on a Sunday. Your assignment for the rest of the day is not to think about work. Go do something else.

22 Elementary School

Analysis

This newly placed principal was responsible for organizing and redirecting the activities of a school that was in disarray and under-performing. She needed to implement an alternative decision-making process that would speak to the needs of her school constituency. She had to build trust in her staff and a supportive and nurturing environment for the children. She also had to begin integrating herself into the politics of the district in order to garner needed resources for her school. During the interview she addressed many of the general leadership areas involved in administration, for example, school goals and priorities, personnel, budgetary decisions, participatory management strategies, politics, ethics, personal goals and frustrations, as well as a host of other leadership considerations specific to her school.

Reorienting students' and teachers' perceptions about themselves addresses the concept of socialization, that is, the shaping of values, ethics, belief systems, social mores, and dispositions through formal and informal organizational mechanisms. This is an extremely important function of the school and one that this principal understood as she began to change the organizational process and activities impacting her students and teachers. We are aware that the process of socialization begins at birth; social interaction is an extremely important feature of this social phenomenon. The social biography of an infant, that personal history which individuals have by virtue of their birth into a family with a definite social status, provides a basis for identifying who the important socializing agents will be and how they will affect the individual's growth and development.

Individuals are constantly confronted with varying and diverse definitions that encompass economic, historical, cultural, social, and scientific dimensions. The social biography of school-age children includes their experiences and associations with their families and teachers, and these experiences will also be profoundly influenced by the social and economic conditions of the family.

By viewing the leadership of this principal in the context of this underlying socialization and conceptual framework, it is easier to understand what motivated her to develop specific school activities. While there were many conditions out of her control, she had hoped the school would begin to provide the environment to change the children's perceptions of themselves and to develop different attitudes and belief systems to make them more capable and successful in school.

By the same token, this socialization concept is not limited to young children. Adults also continue to experience processes of socialization. The variables remain the same. We know that many institutions that involve adults serve the same function, that is, to change behavior. We need but look at

military academies, medical schools, law schools, or any vocational training institution to find evidence of organizational controls that affect people's values and perceptions of themselves. In this elementary school, the principal hoped to provide respect, acknowledgment, and professionalism to her faculty in order to gain their confidence and willingness to commit to the school mission. Obviously, this will require time, but she indicated in her interview a willingness to serve for 3 years at the school, realizing that to change behavior there had to be a sufficient amount of intense and focused involvement.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the key issues this administrator raises in this interview?
2. What is the tone of this interview?
3. Can you identify the changing role of the parents in this community?
4. What is her perception of the district's educational philosophy and what drives that perception?
5. Could you justify the position this principal has taken regarding curriculum and overall school climate?
6. What political changes have transpired in this district, and why?
7. What changes would this administrator recommend that would significantly change the effectiveness of teachers?
8. Do you find her comments consistent with other schools and/or districts you've experienced?
9. If you were appointed principal in this school, what would some of your first-year objectives be?

Student Activities

1. Write a letter to the superintendent requesting additional administrative support.
2. Write a letter of introduction to the community indicating your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
3. Write a letter of introduction to the staff regarding your philosophy, background, and goals for the upcoming school year.
4. Write an agenda for your first faculty meeting at the beginning of the school year.
5. Identify funding sources you would pursue to support your school program.

24 Elementary School

Interview Question

What additional interview questions would you direct to this administrator?

Simulations

Role-play the employment interview of the principal that was conducted by the community of parents, teachers, and district personnel. Develop a series of questions that each role-playing member would have asked that addresses the following areas:

1. What would you expect her objectives to be, short- and long-term?
2. What would you expect her leadership style to be?
3. In what area of leadership would you expect her to be most expert?
4. How would she handle disciplinary issues?

Role-play a parent information night where you need to explain the testing results from your third- and fourth-grade classes to the parents. Included in your presentation should be information about

- curriculum articulation, vertical and horizontal
- test comparisons with other schools
- school patterns and trends for the past 3 years
- identified learning gaps per grade level
- class-size impact on test scores
- instructional material used and newly adopted texts
- home support strategies
- report card design and information source
- federal expectations regarding No Child Left Behind

Role-play a different leadership style that addresses national testing preparation of students to

- veteran teachers
- inexperienced teachers
- parents who are opposed to testing
- parents of “gifted and talented” students

Developing a School Culture

The principal identified several strategies that would help improve the culture of the school.

Consider the following:

How do you define school culture?

Is there more than one culture that operates in a school? Please explain.

What additional strategies would you employ to change the culture of this school?

How would you know you're successful at changing the school culture?

Do you think it's important for the principal to be of the same ethnic background as a significant portion of the student and/or teacher population?

Principal Leadership Applications

At one point in the interview, the principal talks about having to reprimand one of her teachers for using the assembly as a penalty for students if they did not behave. The principal was adamant about not using the assembly for this purpose. She explained how she had approached the teacher and indicated her strong feelings about the desired use of the assembly and potential impact on the children.

Do you feel her approach was correct? Why?

Is there another way she could have communicated this to the teacher?

Role-play the conference with the teacher utilizing a direct leadership style and one that is more consultative.

Which do you find more effective, and why?

During another exchange in the interview, she talked about creating an emotional balance, considering the incredible demands placed on her by the students, parents, and teachers.

What suggestions did she make regarding remaining in control and not out of emotional balance, considering the demands of the job?

How would you handle this level of pressure if you were the principal of this type of school?

What advice did she offer the inexperienced administrators that would help them cope with these demands?

Another very important message of the conversation was delivered when she spoke of the need to separate her professional role from her personal relationship with her teacher colleagues.

26 Elementary School

How did she reconcile the relationship between herself and her teachers?

How was she able to maintain her professionalism and still develop strong personal ties with her faculty?

Do you feel that this would be a difficult role for you in assuming the principalship?

Questions Related to ISLLC Standards

1. How did this principal address Standard 1? Based upon the interview, cite at least one example that demonstrated that this standard was met.
2. How did this principal address Standard 2? Based upon the interview, cite at least one example that demonstrated that this standard was met.
3. How did this principal address Standard 4? Based upon the interview, cite at least one example that demonstrated that this standard was met.
4. Did you find that she also responded to other ISLLC standards? If so, which ones would you say she addressed and please cite specific examples.

Readings and Resources

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities*. New York: Crown.

A powerful critique documenting the disparities that exist in school systems in the United States. This penetrating commentary focuses on the economic and social imbalances between social and racial groups.

Nisbet, R. A. (1965). *Emile Durkheim*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

A critical review of the renowned social scientist that captures his understanding and perception of people and their role in society today.

Rothstein, S. W. (1993). *The voice of the other: Language as illusion in the formation of the self*. New York: Praeger.

A critical analysis of how language affects the perception of social status and role definition in society.