LEADING and LEARNING
Effective School Leadership Through Reflective Storytelling and Inquiry
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Leading and Learning: Effective School Leadership Through Reflective Storytelling and Inquiry

Fred Steven Brill
Foreword by Roland Barth

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To my very tolerant family,

Mimi,
Naya, Spencer, Ariana,
Cal, and Cella
There are many people who think they want to be matadors, only to find themselves in the ring with two thousand pounds of bull bearing down on them, and then discover that what they really wanted was to wear tight pants and hear the crowd roar.

Terry Pearce
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Foreword

“God so loved stories that he created mankind.”

Eighteenth-century Rabbi Nachman had it right. Storytelling and mankind are inseparable. When you think about it, all of the world’s most sacred writings are collections of stories. The Old Testament, New Testament, Koran, Talmud. What is a parable but a story with a teaching?

Alas, those who study this art form tell us that storytelling is dying. We used to sit around the kitchen table after supper and tell our stories. Now we don’t even eat together!

In schools, of course, telling stories has no place in this era of suffocating accountability. Except in kindergarten! Storytelling is not rigorous, legitimate, research based, or testable. It’s just “shooting the breeze.”

Happily, this tidy little volume you are about to experience not only revives storytelling but also transforms it into a powerful form of leadership development.

If you put a quarter in the meter of any school leader, out will tumble a story. In fact, many stories… rich, moving, tedious, dull, funny, tragic stories. I used to gather late on Friday afternoons with a few other principals, and we would exchange events of the week. Most of these, like other practitioner stories, were descriptions of practice. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire this teacher…” And most have therefore been dismissed by academics and by principals themselves as “war stories.” Fun, frivolous, and of little value to others or to the profession.

Actually, I think war stories have considerable value, else why would my principal buddies and I have engaged in them? They offer a means of bonding, entertainment, and a cathartic, emotional cleansing that enable us to put the week behind us so we can rejoin our families for the weekend. But war stories have precious little to offer to improve our practice.

It is only when the story about practice is accompanied by analysis of practice that the narrative is transformed from war story into craft knowledge. “Let me tell you about the time I tried to fire this teacher… and here’s what I learned from the experience.” We learn from experience only when we reflect on our experience.

I have long believed that if school practitioners would ever disclose even a small fraction of what they have learned during their careers in the schools of hard knocks—their craft knowledge about curriculum, parent involvement, discipline, staff development, scheduling—our schools would be transformed overnight.

 Sadly, as a profession, we are not very good at disclosing to others what we have learned. And for good reasons: in a culture of competition, the underlying rule is, “the better you look, the worse I look.” But, “the worse you look, the better I look.” Starved for recognition, why would we want to give others our keys to the store?

And many educators believe they have little of value to offer. It is university researchers who harbor the treasure trove of wisdom. Thus, all too many practitioners have experienced and fear corrosive put-downs
from their peers, like “Big deal, I’ve been doing that for years.” Or, “What a trivial idea.” So why share?

Others fail to disclose their craft knowledge for fear of revealing their blemishes. Who amongst us wants to appear weak and fumbling? As one principal told me, “I live under the burden of ascribed omniscience.”

Even if there is a valuable story to tell and a wish to tell it, all too often disclosure of craft knowledge is greeted with glazed-over eyes. Unfortunately, in our field, the ability to listen is as primitive as the ability to share. Storytelling is dying for want of good listeners.

The newcomer to an organization is the most insightful observer of it. Yet for novices especially, sharing is seen as a violation of taboo: “You must teach here for three years before you can stand up in a faculty meeting and put forth your idea.”

For all of these reasons and despite the best efforts of teacher leaders, principals, and staff developers, principals, like teachers, continue to live in their “self-contained classrooms.” Their abundant craft knowledge languishes behind closed doors.

The gifts of this book to all of us in this beleaguered profession are many: by allowing, encouraging, and expecting principals to tell their stories, it demonstrates that principals will reveal. And it shows us just how to unlock both principal and story.

By elevating reflective storytelling to a systematic, habituated, and thoughtful behavior, it brings legitimacy—even urgency—to the stories of these school leaders. The intention of stories is not just to entertain. They can also teach us, touch us, and cause us to remember.

By unpacking and scrutinizing these stories alongside the reader, Leading and Learning develops helpful frames for analysis with which to mine the gold from the gravel. In doing so, the book reveals as much about the gritty essence of the job of the school principal as any volume I know.

There is one more contribution: the waters between school and university are muddy, disturbed places. Because Fred Brill is a citizen of both cultures, and because he has engaged these new principals as genuine collaborators, these words, like the insights, are “principal centered,” fully approachable, and valuable to residents of each world. Indeed, the book represents a hopeful, all-too-rare example of fruitful cooperation between these two estranged worlds.

One thing we learn from these stories is that, contrary to the belief of many, principals are educable… if the conditions are right. A careful use of storytelling is clearly among the conditions that can promote profound levels of learning by leaders. It is clear from these stories that the ability and insight of principals coming into the profession is rich. This bodes well for our nation’s schools. I only wish I had had access to this book during my own turbulent, troubled days as a school principal. They wouldn’t have been so turbulent and troubled!

In short, dear reader, what you are about to encounter is a story about storytelling and storytellers. I couldn’t agree more with Fred Brill that “There is much that can be learned by looking at stories told by new leaders.”

Just what has been learned from the 246 stories of these new principals? Read on!

Roland S. Barth, May 2008
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, Ira and Julene Brill, for setting me up to take this extraordinary journey. I would also like to acknowledge my wife, Mimi Melodia, for riding beside me and hanging in there, along some backroads that read “curva peligrosa.” My friends and mentors Camille Moore and Bob Blackburn have served as essential guides and cheerleaders throughout the sojourn! I need to begrudgingly offer my appreciation to Jill Duerr-Berrick, who implored me to code each and every narrative. “You’ll never know if you’re missing something,” she taunted. And I would like to thank my running partner, Ken Epstein, who helped shape my thoughts, findings, and practice as we plodded along the trails of Mount Tamalpais. Norton Grubb has served as an extraordinary teacher and academic mentor, and his political rants and demands for linear thinking and the formation of a logical argument have left an indelible mark on my research and my practice. Equally, I would like to acknowledge Patricia Baquedano-Lopez for teaching me that the stories of new school leaders were important and worthy of academic inquiry. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my colleagues and research partners, Lynda Tredway and Jeanette Hernandez, who contributed immensely to the thinking, planning, and development of many of the systems, codes, and protocols in this book. And I offer a heap of appreciation and respect for all members of the Principal Leadership Institute, whose commitment to creating an educational system of the highest quality for all children—and whose passion, thoughtfulness, and honest reflection—make up the stuff of this book. Thank heavens for Sandy Shaw, my supportive friend, surrogate mother, editor, and chiropractor, who has always watched my back. And finally, I want to thank Bill Varner for giving me a shot and offering sharp insight and direction in the creation of this book.
Introduction

FROM BLIND PASSION
TO PROFESSIONAL INQUIRY

Action without reflection is meaningless activity. Reflection without action is mere academia.

Peter Reason, 1998

The seeds of this book began to sprout in the fertile grounds—the dirt, if you will—of my personal experience as a school leader. I served as an assistant principal for three years and then as a middle school principal for nine years. In reflecting on my own development as I struggled to learn the craft of educational leadership, I came to a very simple conclusion: it followed nothing less than a wild, erratic growth pattern, characterized by fits, sputters, stops, and periodic spurts of learning and development.

I did not have a professional learning community to provide the necessary support or structured opportunities that might have prompted me to reflect on and integrate my new experiences. I did not have the language or conceptual frameworks that would have allowed me to formulate a theoretical construct to inform my work as an instructional leader. I had no idea how other school administrators talked about their work, how they made decisions, how they chose which roles to play, or how they navigated the intense emotion that seemed to erupt whenever attempts of any kind were made to change school practice.

As a practitioner, rarely was I interested in—nor did I have the time to read—academic journals. Most scholarly books and articles seemed abstract, wordy, and not overly useful for refining or reforming my everyday practice. However, I recognized that thoughtful researchers had gone into the field to study and learn and then to share their findings. I knew there was much to learn from researchers. Although I understood the importance of using data to drive my decision making, I wondered about this disconnect: why the great divide between theory and practice for so many principals? Schön aptly encapsulated my concern about positioning myself too closely to the world of academia.

*Universities are not devoted to the production and distribution of fundamental knowledge in general. They are institutions committed, for the most part, to a particular epistemology, a view of knowledge that fosters a selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry.*

(1983, vii)

As a new principal, I was in desperate need of more information about the art and science of school leadership. I needed to do more than simply tell war stories to anyone who was willing to listen to my
travails. I needed a means of framing the challenges I confronted daily. I needed guidance on how to develop an effective decision-making process. Most of all, I longed for a professional learning community that would prompt me to reflect on my practice in a supportive and structured manner.

As I entered graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, I had the privilege and opportunity to help shape the structure of a new administrative induction program: the Leadership Support Program (LSP), an outgrowth of the Principal Leadership Institute. The Principal Leadership Institute is a program created by governor’s legislation in 1999 in an effort to reinvigorate the preparation of urban educational leaders in the state of California. It is a fourteen-month (forty-unit) leadership preparation program at UC Berkeley that awards a master of arts in education and a preliminary administrative services credential.

The stories I use throughout this book were video- and audiotaped from school leaders who graduated from the Principal Leadership Institute, assumed positions as site administrators, and participated in UC Berkeley’s Leadership Support Program. In the LSP, novice administrators meet one evening each month, from September through May. From the program’s inception, my colleagues and I were committed to ensuring relevance in the learning activities we facilitated. With this perspective in mind, we adopted problem-based learning (Bridges 1992) as a foundation to explore the ways in which participants addressed challenges. We created structured opportunities for new school leaders to make meaning of their experiences and thoughtfully consider how they could apply their learnings to new challenges that emerged in their respective schools.

The monthly session of the Leadership Support Program began casually: participants tossed down briefcases, exchanged pleasantries, and worked through an evening meal. Before long, shoulders began to relax and brows unfurrowed. What happened next seemed born of necessity: stories literally poured out of these novice administrators, evoking tears and laughter as they replayed their most recent foibles and follies, as well as their successes.

By allowing new administrators to share a story with colleagues, site leaders forgo the persona of the superhero; they remove their capes and reveal the more authentic hand-wringing that takes place beneath the costume of the professional. Reflective storytelling was chosen as a primary tool in the LSP because the activity provides new leaders the opportunity for reflection, sensemaking, and theory building based on actual dilemmas confronted in the field. By looking at the aggregate of the narratives, by diving deep into the data set and unpacking the stories, unexpected patterns and findings emerge that provide a detailed picture of the internal landscape—the inner workings of novice school leaders.

The initial intent of this book was to explore how novice administrators make sense of, conceptualize, and talk about the many roles they play in a challenging, politically charged environment. But as new leaders analyzed their narratives over time, they offered rich reflections of the transformations that took place in their thinking, decision making, and action taking. They presented new ways that they conceptualized their work, and they even described positive feelings of efficacy as they reflected on the ways they were navigating the intense emotion they confronted in the field. Based on these collective
observations and learnings, this text will explore how reflective storytelling and inquiry can prompt school leaders to

- better frame the dilemmas they confront;
- clarify their underlying values;
- determine an effective decision-making process;
- develop new theories and conceptions about their problem-solving;
- and increase their metacognitive thinking about their practice.

The prompts used to elicit the stories in this book were not topically prescriptive; participants were always given the opportunity to speak on any subject that they felt was important. Therefore, the transcribed narratives effectively capture the most salient and poignant issues upon which professional training and development should be based.

One of the greatest challenges I faced in writing this book was remembering which hat I was wearing. At one moment, I was capturing data to learn how new administrators make decisions, embody different roles, and navigate the intense emotion. In the next moment, I was designing protocols and analytical tools or facilitating groups to promote deep reflection and metacognitive processes. Then, of course, there was the endless writing, the search for the most eloquent turn of phrase to capture the essence of school leadership. Fortunately, I had 246 leadership narratives to draw upon that I had collected from new school leaders during a period of three years.

It has been an overwhelming and wildly rewarding endeavor to serve as a facilitator of professional development, a collaborative researcher, a storyteller, a listener, a creator of theories, a portraitist, a qualitative researcher, and, of course, a practitioner. I invite readers to learn from the stories—the slips, stumbles, and falls—shared by growth-oriented school leaders. More important, I urge practicing school leaders to create structured opportunities to engage in their own process of reflective storytelling within a professional learning community and to take charge of their own growth and development in becoming more thoughtful and effective leaders.
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The Many Hats Worn by the School Leader

The school leader of today must play a panoply of roles, engage in a plethora of activities, and make a myriad of decisions to ensure student learning. The list of roles and responsibilities is vast and overwhelming. While we do know that principals with very different communication, management, and personality styles can be strong instructional leaders (Smith and Keith 1971), there has been little analysis of the ways new leaders talk about the various roles they play in striving to manage the responsibilities of their position and improve the teaching and learning in their schools.

Over a period of three years, I collected 246 narratives from novice school leaders enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley’s Leadership Support Program. The stories were audio- or videotaped and transcribed for the benefit of researchers and practitioners alike, so that we could collectively understand the recurring themes, roles, and practices of new administrators. The beginning stages of this research were modeled after the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot:
First, we listen for repetitive refrains that are spoken (or appear) frequently and persistently, forming a collective expression of commonly held views. Second, we listen for resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the way actors illuminate and experience their realities. Third, we listen for the themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem to be important to organizational continuity and coherence. Fourth, we use triangulation to weave together the threads of data converging from a variety of sources. And finally, we construct themes and reveal patterns among perspectives that are often experienced as contrasting and dissonant by the actors. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 193)

But which roles do new leaders most frequently play? Are these roles chosen or assigned? How do new leaders learn to play the roles they are uncomfortable playing? How do they learn to authentically inhabit the role of the school leader? By looking at the frequency of roles described in administrative narratives, one begins to get a picture not only of the concerns and challenges that new administrators face but also of their corresponding priorities and underlying values.

In September 2002, when we asked new leaders enrolled in the Leadership Support Program to identify the different roles they play, the list they compiled was vast and overwhelming: counselor, social worker, hand-holder/teacher supporter, problem-solver, listener, stress sponge, lunch server, traffic guard, police officer, nurse, mom, dad, enforcer, judge, disciplinarian/enforcer, moderator, peacemaker, coordinator, organizer, supervisor, mentor, observer, teacher, motivator, evaluator, ambassador, coach, student advocate, instructional leader, visionary, communicator, equity promoter, role model, parent liaison, researcher, investigator, custodian, test coordinator, scheduler, system challenger/system builder, accountant, fund-raiser, paper pusher, and manager.

Participants were asked to consolidate this list and find larger baskets to hold these different roles. In the traditional academic paradigm, only the researcher designs the study, gathers the data, manages
the project, draws conclusions, and builds new theories. However, engaging participants in a practice of collaborative inquiry afforded new leaders the opportunity to develop a common vocabulary and to identify and refine common roles and actions that characterized their practice. The process of coding encouraged participant researchers to move fluidly from theory to practice, from experience back to abstract reconceptualization.

In sum, new leaders were afforded ongoing opportunities to review their own narratives, develop their own set of codes, and create their own common language to better understand their practice. The most common roles that emerged in the 246 leadership stories were enforcer, system challenger, equity promoter, and instructional leader.

It is not at all surprising that one of the most common roles played by new school leaders is that of enforcer. New site administrators are regularly assigned the role of disciplinarian. However, if education is about the business of teaching and learning, why were only 15 percent of the narratives about actively and directly playing the role of instructional leader? Why did only 2 percent of the stories describe school leaders actively supporting teachers? Many of the narratives contained proclamations about the importance of serving as an instructional leader, but it appears that leaders were regularly compelled (or expected) to address the urgent before focusing on the important. As Karen M., a second-year elementary school principal, eloquently expresses:

“I want to improve teaching and learning; that’s what my whole life is about. At the same time when I first started as principal . . . I quickly discovered that I couldn’t be about teaching and learning unless other things were in place. (April 2004)”

Although it is logical to expect that many new leaders would thirst to play the role of equity promoter, especially when observing or learning about an injustice or some form of discrimination toward a child, it was very surprising to find that the most common role new leaders described in their stories was that of system challenger. Even though school leaders complained of feeling overwhelmed, it appears that they were willing to move outside their prescribed job description to fill a gap or build a system to improve efficiency or effectiveness in the way business was conducted in their school communities.

In Chapter 1, I describe the critical and relentless role of the school leader, and I show how new leaders can manage their own professional development to move more deliberately along the continuum from novice to expert. I then show how storytelling—a natural and necessary activity—can serve as a tool for professional growth, especially when stories are shared with like-minded colleagues who understand the trials and tribulations of being a school leader. I describe in detail the structure of the reflective storytelling process, the primary activity used to prompt the sharing of meaningful and relevant narratives. I show the ways in which narratives were captured, and I share the various processes used to analyze the stories and to uncover common themes and patterns of practice.

In chapters 2 through 5, I highlight the common roles and activities that new leaders talk about in the stories they tell, with particular attention to the roles of enforcer, system challenger, equity promoter, and instructional leader. Each of these chapters includes relevant narratives shared by new
school leaders that are unpacked and analyzed to uncover what can be learned from the decisions and actions described in the stories. Identifying, quantifying, and exploring the roles that new leaders play will be the starting point to understand how they can better prioritize and perform their work. At the end of each of these chapters, I offer probing questions that prospective and practicing school leaders might consider when reflecting on the ways in which they play (or might play) the different roles.
The Reflective Storytelling Process: 
Illuminating the Path from Novice to Expert Leadership

The Master gave his teaching in parables and stories—which his disciples listened to with pleasure—and occasional frustration, for they longed for something deeper. The Master was unmoved. To all their objections he would say, “You have yet to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story.”

Anthony DeMello, 1985

Novice school leaders tend to be passionate individuals who are hungry to learn and grow and improve their practice. They understand that education is crucial for the students they serve, but also that it is essential for their own survival as a school leader. Although many a leader would relish the opportunity to reflect on a prickly decision or contemplate how to work through a complex personnel issue, different constituents and stakeholders expect leaders to have the right answers and to take appropriate actions immediately and decisively. Implement! Execute! Decide! But how and when do school administrators make sense of the many challenges they face? How do they become more effective in the art and science of school leadership?

Novice administrators regularly talk of being overwhelmed by the relentlessness of their work; they express uneasiness with the ambiguity of the roles they are expected to play. They struggle to find meaning and to create coherence and clarity in their work.

Being new to a leadership position, being new to a school site, or being unclear about roles, responsibilities, and expectations can be highly stress inducing. It takes time and experience to comfortably assume the identity of a school leader. Before we explore how reflective storytelling might be used as a tool for professional growth and development, it is important to understand why the role of the school leader is so important to a school’s success.

The Critical and Relentless Role of the School Leader

Whenever one finds an effective school, there exists an effective principal as its leader.

—Daisy Gonzalez, 1997
A 2004 report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation found that leadership ranked second only to teaching in improving student achievement (Leithwood, Anderson, and Wahlstrom 2004). Although successful school leaders spend significant time at the intersection of teaching and learning, they are also responsible for the operational management of the school, community relations, and culture building. At one moment, they may be putting a Band-Aid on a child’s knee; the next moment, they might be working with an angry parent whose child was suspended for fighting. One day, they are facilitating the professional development on rubric development for teachers; the next day, they are convening a school site council to determine the best use of Title I funds. Educational leaders are charged with setting the tone, crafting the vision, and making good decisions to create a clean, safe, and healthy learning environment for every member of the school community.

Indeed, the principalship is one of the most exciting and rewarding roles in the world of education. It is the position at the epicenter of school reform and site-level decision making. A strong principal cultivates an effective learning community for students, teachers, and parents, and is able to develop strong relationships with individuals across stakeholder groups. The effective principal is the conduit, the connection, the spark, the stick, the carrot, the architect, and the builder responsible for ensuring that effective teaching and learning is taking place for every student in every classroom throughout the school. But can school leaders really meet the needs, expectations, and mandates of all stakeholders? Bolman and Deal question the implied notion of school leader as superhero:

We have certainly tried to make organizations better… The most basic change strategy is to change management and leadership. Modern mythology promises that organizations will work splendidly if they are well managed. (1997, 8)

The position of school principal requires an ability to recognize and understand the root causes of the challenges emerging in the field. It necessitates continual reprioritization and alignment of scarce resources. In addition, the work must be done beneath the stage lights, where any decisions and actions, signs of tentativeness, and missteps or miscommunications are witnessed and judged by a wide swath of stakeholders. Indeed, impeccable judgment is expected at most every turn. Ours has become an extremely litigious culture, and the principal is expected to serve thoughtfully without ever breaking a sweat, decide without showing any sign of angst or uncertainty, and resolve so that all parties feel listened to and validated. Unfortunately, like any baseball manager who does not get immediate and favorable outcomes, the school leader is subject to replacement at the end of the season.

The responsibilities, conflicting expectations, time demands, stressors, and challenges associated with administrative positions often make such jobs highly undesirable. In his exploration of why teachers are unwilling to move into administration, Duane Moore found that the top three reasons for not becoming a principal were “increased time commitments, the influence of outside groups, and too much bureaucratic paperwork” (1999). The principal is getting pushed further and further away from the business of teaching and learning. One school leader described the sense of being overwhelmed by the competing demands:
And then I get to my office this afternoon, and I have papers all over the place. You can always tell what kind of state my work life is in because when it’s really, really busy, there’s just papers falling off the desk and under the desk. And you know, I keep putting things into my in-basket; my in-basket now is like this [holds hands about three feet apart]. And I just felt so frazzled because I knew I had to get here by five, and I’ve usually been staying until eight o’clock every night, so I was like, “Crap, I don’t have time.” (Gretchen C., September 2002)

In a typical workday, few school leaders are afforded the opportunity to reflect on their practice, the decisions they make, or the actions they take. Yet, regular reflection on practice is imperative for professional growth and development. School leaders are calling for structured opportunities to serve as coresearchers and co-learners who base their learning on actual challenges confronted in the field. Although the job of school leader is not for everyone, it is clear that—with the proper training and support—administrators can become more effective, resilient, reflective, deliberate, principle-based leaders. New leaders can learn to choose where they allocate their time and other precious resources, and how they might work more effectively to make decisions and improve student learning.

**ADULT LEARNING THEORY**

School leaders must persistently exhibit, model, and celebrate lifelong learning themselves... If [students] see adults who are constantly asking questions, reading, sharing good ideas, and posing and solving problems, so will they.

—Roland Barth in DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour, 2005

Adult learning theory suggests that professionals learn not only from their own practice, which is a trial-and-error type of learning, but also from interactions—formal and informal conversations—with other professionals (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 2000). When systems and protocols are embedded within a professional learning community, there are more likely to be higher levels of achievement, more positive relationships, and psychologically healthier group members than might be found in individual learning situations (Brown and Campione 1996).

One fact is clear from looking at the research on professional development: learning and reflection do not happen readily in isolation. Learning is a social activity, and it comes largely from our participation in daily life. Communities of practice are everywhere (Lave and Wenger 1991); they emerge in social and professional settings, and they fill an inherent need for struggling individuals to make sense of their challenges. One new school leader explained:
We’ve got to learn from each other’s mistakes. I’m not going to live long enough to make them all myself. (Sally B., October 2003)

In addition to managing their own internal change process, school leaders are responsible for moving school reform efforts forward. But change is hard, in individuals and within organizations. The school leader will be expected to tend to the emotional responses from the teachers and support staff who are expected to implement and adopt new practices and strategies.

One of the most damaging myths that aspiring school administrators often learn is that the change process, if managed well, will proceed smoothly. That myth amounts to little more than a cruel hoax, an illusion that encourages educators to view problems and conflict as evidence of mistakes or mismanaged process rather than as the inevitable byproducts of serious reform. (DuFour and Eaker 1998, 49)

Indeed, the school leader must manage dissension and opposition, setbacks, and unintended consequences. Although it is sometimes excruciatingly challenging, school leaders also must maintain an unshakable belief that all human beings, including adults, can continually learn and grow.

If an inquiry stance is maintained, any challenges, failures, and setbacks can become clear indicators of the need to adjust, refine, or improve a particular process. In his book *How People Change*, Allen Wheelis argues that, although “character has a forward propulsion that tends to carry it unaltered into the future, suffering can lead to insight, will, action, and ultimately change” (1973, 101). Those engaged in collaborative inquiry will make meaning of past experiences and return to the field to test their new theories and actions in an ongoing cycle of experimentation and learning. This is a process that effective school leaders regularly engage in and facilitate.

**THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:**
**A SPACE FOR REFLECTIVE STORYTELLING**

*If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured... collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. —Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour, 2005*

New school leaders are expected to burst forth from the cloistered phone booth of an administrative credentialing program, take to the air, and effectively meet the needs of all students, teachers, parents, and higher-level administrators. Unfortunately, leadership development programs are not...
generally structured or organized in such a way that prospective leaders are prepared to address the challenges they will face and the various roles they will be expected to play in the school setting. Classroom learning for professionals is inclined toward the theoretical rather than the practical.

Sadly, “collaboration is not natural or common in the traditional school environment. For generations, teachers characteristically closed the classroom door behind them and acted as independent monarchs of their own domains, expecting neither oversight nor support from colleagues” (Blankenstein 2004, 137). It is tragic that schools become environments in which teachers engage in a form of parallel play. Child psychologists describe this behavior in preschoolers as when similar activities take place in different corners of a sandbox, with nary a word of interaction flowing between the children. In school environments, those who have participated in committees to improve one area of the school typically have not met with much success in making a difference or even having their voices heard. One new leader offered his favorite quote when the subject of professional collaboration was being discussed: “A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and then quietly strangled” (James S., February 2003; quote from Sir Barnett Cocks, former British Clerk of the House of Commons). Clearly, a lot of work needs to be done to get educators to learn, understand, and experience the value of participating in a professional learning community.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are intended to do much more than provide emotional support and encouragement. Under the proper conditions, participants will begin to take risks and share genuine concerns as they move along the continuum from novice to expert. Structured opportunities for reflective storytelling can ensure relevance and immediacy, as group members hold one another responsible for examining and acquiring essential bodies of skills and knowledge (DuFour and Eaker 1998). With proper training, colleagues can learn to prod one another toward growth and development. Challenging situations presented in the form of leadership stories can provide rich fodder for collaborative inquiry, reflection, and professional learning.

In the world of education, professional learning communities have become all the rage. Workshops are held around the country to promote the creation of collaborative structures focused on the improvement of student learning. DuFour and Eaker (1998) describe the critical components of a professional learning community: participants develop a shared mission, vision, and values; they engage in collective inquiry, which includes public reflection and the building of a shared meaning; they maintain an action orientation, promoting experimentation and a focus on continual improvement; and, finally, they maintain a strong outcomes orientation that places a high value on results rather than intentions. The four guiding questions that are intended to frame the work of a professional learning community (Dufour, Eaker, and DuFour 2005, 15) are:

- What is it we want all students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has mastered the essential learning?
- How will we respond if a student experiences initial difficulty in learning?
- How will we deepen the learning for students who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?
It is no wonder that PLCs are gaining traction in public and private organizations. Professional learning communities can meet so many basic human needs: the need for a sense of belonging and acceptance, the need for esteem based on learning and growth, the need to serve a higher moral purpose, and the need for meaning in our work and our lives. If this sounds vaguely familiar, it is because it calls to mind Maslow (1943) and his hierarchy of needs. The lower level of Maslow’s pyramid contains our basic human needs (physiological requirements such as oxygen, food, and water). The next levels are safety; love, acceptance, and belonging; and esteem in the community. The apex of the pyramid, the highest form of human development, is the need for self-actualization. Maslow argued that the only reason individuals would not move toward self-actualization is because of hindrances placed in their way by society. Sadly, educational organizations often fit neatly into this category. DuFour and Eaker describe the role that professional learning communities can play in meeting these higher human needs:

Above all else, there is a basic human desire to live a life of meaning, to serve a higher purpose, to make a difference in the world… The professional learning community sets out to restore that belief by creating a community of caring and mutual concern… When educators connect with one another, they can accomplish far more collectively than they could ever hope to accomplish individually… Educators hunger for evidence that they are successful in their work, that they are part of a significant collective endeavor, and that their efforts are making a difference in the lives of their students. (1998, 281–282)

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADER IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

The future of leadership must be embedded in the hearts and minds of the many, and not rest on the shoulders of the heroic few.

—Alan Blankenstein, 2004

What is the role of the school leader in cultivating professional learning communities? Where and how do school leaders get to reflect on their own craft? If PLCs are primarily about teachers collaboratively engaging in the improvement of the teaching and learning activities that take place in their classrooms, what is the role of the school leader in this process?

Much has been written about the “loose coupling” that exists in school organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Tyack and Cuban 1995). Regardless of administrative intentions, desires, suggestions, or expectations, it can be very challenging to influence teacher practice. School leaders are not direct
service providers. Rather, the teachers are responsible for student learning, and a classroom with a closed door has proven to be a safe haven for students and teachers to do what they have always done and to resist the latest school reform effort. For school leaders to achieve a desired outcome of improved student learning, they first must figure out how to influence teacher actions in the classroom. At the same time, they must efficiently tend to the various operational responsibilities and institutional expectations that are part of the position.

Building on the four guiding questions asked by DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005), I propose four questions that must be continually addressed within a professional learning community of school leaders:

- What is it we want all teachers to know and be able to do?
- How will we know when each teacher has mastered the essential learning and is actively using the agreed-on tools and strategies?
- How will we respond if a teacher experiences initial difficulty in learning or actively resists implementation?
- How will we cultivate leadership capacity and opportunity for those teachers who have already mastered essential knowledge and skills?

School administrators cannot improve a school and increase student learning on their own. A primary mission for all educators is to help students understand that their education is not about their parents or their teachers or their principal—rather, it is for their own benefit. It is intended to increase their opportunities for success in college or the workplace. Likewise, a primary charge of the school leader is to help teachers understand that collaborative processes and active engagement in a professional learning community are not about the principal, the district, the state, or the federal government. These are simply the best ways we know to do business. Over time, as these practices become systemic, the principal becomes less visible and works behind the scenes to ensure that teachers have the necessary support and resources to participate fully and deeply in a professional learning community; the notion of distributed leadership becomes a reality rather than a buzzword. Professional learning communities can provide the structures to engage in collaborative inquiry for the purpose of improving instructional practice and determining the necessary actions that must be taken to ensure that all students are learning.

The role of the school principal is one of the loneliest and most challenging positions in the field of education. School leaders must seek out or create their own PLCs, so that they—like students and teachers—continually engage in reflective practices with colleagues who are interested in growing and improving their practice. Professional learning communities are all about translating theory into practice, learning into action. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour recommend that educators “use transformation in thought, word, and deed as the standard against which you assess the quality of your own learning and that of others in the school community” (2005, 173).
THE POWER OF LANGUAGE, THE POWER OF STORY

Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny.

—Mahatma Gandhi, 1869–1948

The need to communicate and connect with those who understand is profound. Even without the formal structures of a professional learning community, new leaders often are drawn to one another for mutual support and the opportunity to share their latest war stories. Great catharsis can be achieved merely by opening the floodgates and allowing emotionally charged stories and anecdotes to spill forth. Through reflective storytelling, new leaders can begin the (sometimes painful) process of self-reflection. As one new leader confessed, “In administration, the real you can't help but come out; the way you handle difficult situations makes you naked in front of the whole school community” (Frank S., March 2004). Reflective storytelling is not about providing a platform for self-flagellation; the process is intended to create the space for thoughtful deliberation that leads to professional growth. With structured protocols in place, storytelling can become more focused and relevant, and it can inform the practice of reflective school leaders.

The need to understand the complexities of school leadership is deep and far-reaching. School leaders are influenced by past experiences, personality characteristics, and their ability to learn and adapt; novice leaders also must find a way to comprehend the challenges they are confronting in the field. Storytelling can function as a means to make sense of new experiences. One school leader described his jarring entrance into the world of educational administration:

“Before I became a principal, I believed I was absolutely prepared for the role. As a teacher-leader, I was given enormous responsibility, training, and coaching. I was fairly successful, and I believed the transition would be seamless. About three months into the job, I hadn’t slept through a single night without dreaming about my work, leaving myself voice mails, and taking notes in the middle of the night about what I did wrong and what I needed to do first thing in the morning. I called up my mentor and asked her, “Why didn’t you ever tell me how hard it would be? Why didn’t you warn me?” And she just laughed and laughed. (Brett F., November 2002)

In addition to serving as a means to communicate life events, storytelling can be a platform for expressing beliefs and personal values. Narratives not only arise from experience, they also shape perceptions of experience. Storytelling helps us explain, rationalize, and clarify our personal experiences (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Folklore, literary analysis, psychology, and sociolinguistics offer overlapping theoretical frames that shed light on the ways that stories can be used as a tool to communicate or construct our personal identity, to learn, to help us make sense of the way the world works, and to illuminate where and how we are situated in our workplace.
Personal narratives shared by new school leaders offer a firsthand account of how other administrators adopt the language of the profession and how they are socialized into their role within the school community. Baquedano-Lopez describes this process of identity formation:

\textit{In everyday life, and across the lifespan, we assume moral stances as we communicate with people and assess ideas or events. Language allows us to negotiate notions of morality and it provides a medium through which moral understanding of lives and events, our orientation in the world as individuals and as part of a collectivity are constructed, maintained and transformed.} (1998, 109)

The difficulty of learning to speak the “language of the school leader” is often shared in the stories told by novice school leaders as they struggle to find agency and identity in their new roles. Participation in a new culture is not merely about learning \textit{from} the talk; rather, it is about learning \textit{to} talk with the appropriate nuance, emotion, and grammar of the school leader (Lave and Wenger 1991). Effective use of language can influence the practices and corresponding outcomes of new school leaders.

If language is the vessel through which meaning is transported (March 1994), it is no wonder that reflective storytelling can provide entertainment, relevance, and insight to the struggling administrator. New school leaders need to make sense of their new experiences. They need to make meaning of the roles they are playing and the decisions they are making, and storytelling can effectively meet such needs. As John Searle, professor of philosophy, asserts: “Words shape our thinking. Thinking shapes our reality” (2004). Deveare Smith, a qualitative researcher/performance artist, articulates her appreciation for the power that stories possess to shape our perceptions of reality:

\textit{I had never thought that our reality was so dependent on narratives... it may be that we need narratives to create a certain fiction... The creation of language is the creation of a fiction. The minute we speak, we are in that fiction. It's a fiction designed, we hope, to reveal a truth. There is no “pure” language. The only “pure language” is the initial sounds of a baby... We are linguistic animals. At the very least language is currency as we create “reality.”} (2000, 293)

Administrators learn very quickly that the language they use is vitally important and deeply considered by the various stakeholders in the school community. Indeed, words and stories not only convey thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, they also serve to shape our conceptions of the world. Language and the development of a common vocabulary can be very powerful tools in a school leader’s arsenal.

\section*{Theory Development Through Storytelling}

To gain a new level of insight into personal behavior, the reflective practitioner assumes a dual stance, being, on one hand, the actor in a drama and, on the other hand, the critic who sits in the audience watching and analyzing the performance.

\textit{—Karen Osterman and Robert Kottkamp, 1993}