# The Potential of Positive Leadership for School Improvement: A Cross-Disciplinary Synthesis

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## Abstract

In this paper, we undertake four formative assignments: (1) We introduce the idea of *positive school leadership* (PSL) based largely on theory and research conducted outside the educational sector and introduce four orientations that anchor PSL; (2) we develop ideas about how asset-grounded concepts of leadership can be incorporated into schooling; (3) we examine how concepts underlying PSL may affect schools, classrooms, teachers, and students; and (4) using narrative research and grounded theory we introduce an overview of empirical evidence linking PSL and valued outcomes. We conclude by discussing the significance of PSL for organizational theory and leadership preparation and professional development.

**Keywords:** leadership; positive psychology; school improvement

## Introduction

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p 5) argue that "[t]he exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living." Critics who document the prevalence of deficit thinking about students from less advantaged families and communities (Garcia & Guerra, 2004) also point to fundamental weaknesses in schools and schooling. This paper introduces questions about how we can incorporate a focus on "making life worth living" into research on schools and school leadership. We ground our argument in an interrogation of a thick line of organizational research emerging from positive psychology, which has recently begun to gain traction among educational scholars. In particular, our focus is on incorporating an asset-focused approach to understanding leadership

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behaviors that grow out of positive values and orientations, and how they affect individuals, teams, and the school as a whole.

Based on an extensive review of publications, we set out a framework for thinking about positive school leadership, or PSL.[2] We will describe underlying principles of PSL, synthesized from the evidentiary base (including transformational, servant, authentic, distributed, integrative, and other similar leadership models) and including (for example) a focus on assets, human values, positive modeling, developing positive relationships with all members and stewardship. We also synthesize what theoretical, observational and empirical research tells us about the impact of these positive leadership behaviors on relationships. We will discuss the implications of the research, much of which comes from outside of education and outside of North America. In particular, we point to the spillover effects of positive organizational leadership: Because schools are socializing and preparing the next generation of citizens, positive outcomes at all levels will deepen socio-emotional learning for students and model positive adult work settings. In addition, we point to the significance of positive scholarship for organizational theory and leadership preparation and professional learning.

## Positive organizational studies

*Some magic takes place is the crucible of leadership*
*(Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004, p. 227)*

Positive psychology is well established in scholarly and more popular literature and has an increasing impact on education (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). This perspective underlies the emphasis in this paper on well-being—the importance of creating school settings where all people flourish.[3] Research in the general (non-school) organizational literature is clear about what this means: positive work organizations are ones in which individuals are motivated because they see their work is meaningful (Dik, Steger, Fitch-Martin, & Onder, 2013). They are also places that reinforce a positive sense of self and identity (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), even when the work does not provide immediate, frequent external rewards. Flourishing requires that members find their work with others rewarding—they enjoy their teams and find that they provide challenge and foster creativity (West, Hirst, Richter, & Shipton, 2004). They also believe that their immediate supervisor cares about them and has a commitment to fostering their development (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008).

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[2] We focus primarily on formal school leaders with administrative responsibilities. However, based on the underlying research and the nature of professional work in schools, we argue that the results are generalizable to informal leaders and teachers.

[3] Well-being and flourishing are not identical with happiness, but generally include other dimensions such as resilience, meaning and virtue (Wong, 2011).

In addition, in flourishing organizations members look beyond their personal experiences to assess the climate and culture of the larger group. They assess the ethical environment as being fair and just (Walumbwa, Wu, & Orwa, 2006); they also see opportunities for both individual and collective redesign that may increase satisfaction and productivity (Oldham & Hackman, 2010), which is often referred to as job-crafting (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013) and is a core component of continuous improvement cultures. Empowerment of teams as a strategy to enrich work has, of course, a long tradition in Scandinavian organizational research (Emery & Thorsrud, 1976).

## Schools as organizations

None of these ideas appears foreign to anyone who has studied schools and teachers, and they are clearly related to a long line of research that examines teacher work settings (Day, 2002; Louis, 1998; Rosenholtz, 1989). Thus, our purpose is not to propose an entirely novel theoretical framework but to contextualize PSL and positive school organization in the larger arena of what is known from research in education and other sectors. In addition, because research on school effectiveness that is linked to positive organizational research and positive psychology is increasingly robust (Sammons, 2007, Masten, Herberss, Cutuli & Lefavor, 2008), we believe that educational scholars can make significant contributions to the larger literature on how organizations become more productive.

Translating research from other sectors into educational settings requires a recognition that schools are different from business organizations and most other human service settings. Whether a person buying insurance or is admitted to a hospital for an operation, their relationship to the organization is episodic and short-term. In schools, however, the "clients" (students) are actually members who have a long-term, multi-year and often involuntary relationship with the employees. As long-term members, the overall climate and culture of the setting will have a greater impact on them than an insurance broker or hospital nurse —an impact that increases because schools are places where younger and more vulnerable individuals are socialized, developed, and supported (Parsons, 1959). From the perspective of a child, the classroom is their work team and their teachers, rather than the principal or superintendent, are their immediate leaders. Teachers are their supervisors and are expected to shape the culture and climate of the classroom, and thus the conditions of student work. In the eyes of students and most parents, therefore, teachers are authoritative leaders.

We thus approach flourishing from an organizational perspective that assumes that the well-being of students can only be accomplished if adults also experience well-being. Teachers' experience of well-being is reinforced in interactions with students in their classrooms, but is also situated in their work teams (Van Der Vegt, Emans, & Van De Vliert, 2000, Walumbwa, Wang, Lawler, & Shi, 2004), their involvement with other teams (Kärkkäinen, 2000), and in relationship to formal leaders (Bono et al., 2007; Leithwood & Duke, 1998; Murphy & Louis, 2018). Although research is limited, positive

organizational leadership is associated with cultural competence and inclusive behavior in health care (Dauvrin & Lorant, 2015), education (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2013) and business (Przytuła, Rozkwitalska, Chmielecki, Sułkowski, & Basinska, 2014). As we will show, this is also true in schools.

In addition, we further argue that schools in which all adults and students thrive are closely engaged with the communities that they serve (Riley, 2013; Youngblade et al., 2007) because children move between school, family and community settings on a daily basis. However, research both within and outside of schools implies that strong relationships between educators, families and communities will not occur unless the adults and children in the school have developed a sense of mutual ownership and responsibility (Green, 2015; Riley, 2017; Sanders & Harvey, 2002) that is associated with positive leadership.

In other words, based on a positive organizational framework and empirical studies from multiple countries and disciplines, we submit that asset-based adult relationships are a precondition for creating student well-being, and that only where all or most of the members of the school are thriving are they able to make a positive contribution to the larger society (Louis & Murphy, 2012). We furthermore argue that the emphasis of positive organizational research emphasis on the centrality of relationships to human flourishing, both in and out of organizations, is connected to the larger theme of overall organizational effectiveness.

## A babel of theories and frameworks

Competing and overlapping theories and models complicates the application of positive frameworks to leadership in educational settings. Our approach to investigating the conceptual commonalities was to conduct a narrative synthesis. According to Popay et al. (2006), narrative synthesis is

> an approach to the systematic review and synthesis of findings from multiple studies that relies primarily on the use of words and text to summarize and explain the findings of the synthesis… the defining characteristic is a textual approach to the process of synthesis to 'tell the story' of the findings from the included studies. (p. 5)

Rogers et al. (2009), indicate that the defining characteristic of a narrative synthesis is the use of an interpretive narrative.[4] Our choice was dictated by the broad focus of our inquiry and the various methods used in studies. These characteristics suggest, according to Popay et al. (2006) and Collins and Fauser (2005), that narrative analysis, in contrast to statistical approaches, are most like to result in knowledge that is usable in policy and practice.

Our data were primarily articles—with some books, scholarly papers, and reports. We began with sampling, conducting a theory-based search of materials using Google

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[4] Narrative synthesis has recently emerged as an alternative to statistical meta-analysis in the health sciences in order to account for observational and non-experimental studies and clinical data.

Scholar. This search engine identifies academic sources from a wide variety of databases (e.g., JSTOR, Elsevier, Education Resources Information Center, Research Gate, and ProQuest). We conducted an *exhaustive review* (Hallinger, 2014). That is, we pulled up all the articles (over 700) we could locate that used terms associated with positive leadership, including both education and other sectors.[5] We then pulled abstracts, and after examining them "for appropriate content" (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007, p. 1138), we compiled those that were somewhat consistent with the design of our inquiry.

We coded using a general accounting for codes that are not content-specific but that points to the general domains in which codes would be inductively developed (Miles & Huberman, 1994) which, at this point, were descriptive and pre-figured headings. We then recopied all the newly coded articles and organized the codes into four domains. We used pattern analysis and grounded theorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and sense-making analysis (Weick, 1995) to divide the sets of codes into a second level, from which we developed themes. By revisiting the themes multiple times, we were able to code to the third level of analysis. This set of codes became the unit of analysis for further work.[6]

As we began to examine both the theoretical and empirical literature, what was striking was the variety of leadership models that shared elements of positive psychology but that resulted in distinct lines of research. The most popular (and most frequently applied to education) is transformational leadership (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), but almost as common are competing models such as authentic leadership (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997; Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004) and servant leadership (Crippen, 2004; Greenleaf, 1998; Sergiovanni, 2000). And, there are many variants that incorporate some aspects of a positive organizational framework such as democratic, participative and distributed leadership (Somech, 2005; Starrat, 2001). Thus, it was challenging is to read across the significant contributions, both empirical and theoretical, to located commonalities. We tried to do this by (re)searching for leadership and organizational publications using all of the above terms, and a few others, such as appreciative, ethical, team, and virtuous.

## The virtue and character base of positive leaders

Research on *character* gets renewed public attention largely when leaders appear to be deficient in some way. We often attribute bad leadership character to people who cause visible harm, but a nuanced perspective goes beyond evil and harm to examine other principles that are visible by their absence: unreliability, inattentiveness to others, or excessive ambition (Kellerman, 2004). People in leadership positions also describe their views of their work in ways that suggest ambiguity and lack of coherence (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). We draw primarily on research that avoids extremes of dysfunction

[5] Because search engines tend to privilege research in North American journals, we made additional searches using country names to ensure that our findings were more comprehensive.

[6] When key concepts emerged but few empirical studies were found, we searched the databases again.

or excellence and takes into consideration how others view typical leaders. From a wide array of theoretical, qualitative and quantitative studies that attempt to assess what people look for in a leader, we found remarkable agreement on some principles that are (relatively) consistently expressed in leaders' work with others:

- *Positive orientation*: They focus on assets, including how to develop and improve both people and work settings (Fineman, 2006; Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004);
- *Moral orientation*: They have a moral imagination and behave in ways that are visibly value-based, drawing out and expressing a long-term perspective on doing the right things (Fineman, 2006; Hannah, Lester, & Vogelgesang, 2005);
- *Relationship orientation*: They demonstrate caring, support and a growth-based orientation to all members (Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2016; Driscoll & McKee, 2007);
- *Stewardship orientation*: They see their work as fostering both the individual, group and organizational stakeholder good, and are able to balance those interests when they are poorly aligned (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Reave, 2005).

We emphasize that, although these dimensions are not fully congruent with the most frequently referenced model of positive leadership in the educational literature (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000 and 2005), they are consistent on many dimensions. While the research on the importance of antecedent virtues and character are relatively thick in both business and other helping professions, they are thin in education, where the emphasis has been on leader behaviors (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005). While we agree that actions are critical in any model of positive leadership, it is time to recognize that who leaders are in any organization makes a difference to the levels of commitment, trust, and motivation to cooperation, a conclusion substantiated by recent systematic analyses from other sectors (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman & Humphrey, 2011; Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2005).

## Positive leadership in practice

Research suggests that leaders whose behavior reflects the above values have positive impacts on individual members, teams, and organizational climate and culture. These do not occur because of magical thinking or invisible processes. Rather, empirical studies trace the effects of leaders to significant observed behaviors that are, for example, viewed as affirming and asset-based, developmental, and focused on the common good (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015; Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004). At least one study suggests that there is a distinctive difference between a positive orientation that results in *doing good* and efforts to avoid harm (Stahl & De Luque, 2014).

What is important is that others see a leader's behavior as consistent with that person's espoused values, and that it is clearly directed toward flourishing in both the organization

(and its formal goals) and the lives of its members. Effective leaders in non-school settings are defined by "the quality of the social exchange between leaders and followers, characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation" (Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen p. 333). This observation, has, of course, been reflected for some time in school leadership texts (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1986; Deal & Peterson, 1994) as well as recent studies of trust and respect in school settings (Louis & Murphy, 2017; Paulsen & Høyer, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Louis and Murphy (2017), for example, show that where principals trust their teachers' professional competence, teachers are more likely to say that they have a caring principal. Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) summarize work on their popular model by pointing to the strong evidence that helping people and building a collaborative culture (which they term *redesigning the organization*) are central.

The pivot point by which leaders create influence, however, is through their focus on maintaining meaningful relationships with others. While popular leadership texts (Kotter, 1996) often emphasize the importance of a leader's vision and strategy as the driver of success, empirical work suggests that to have an impact, leaders must first establish relationships characterized by values, trust, and consistency in character (Murphy & Louis, 2018). They must also sustain these through direct management exchanges that develop and sustain relationships, including modeling, recognizing others, making sure that the work is stimulating, regular consulting, and so on (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2007). The preponderance of positive, relationship-fostering exchanges between leaders and other members that reflect the kind of values discussed above engenders positive responses on the part of others.[7] The foundation of a positive approach to leadership, which summarizes our argument to this point, is shown below in figure 1.

*Figure 1: The foundation for positive leadership*
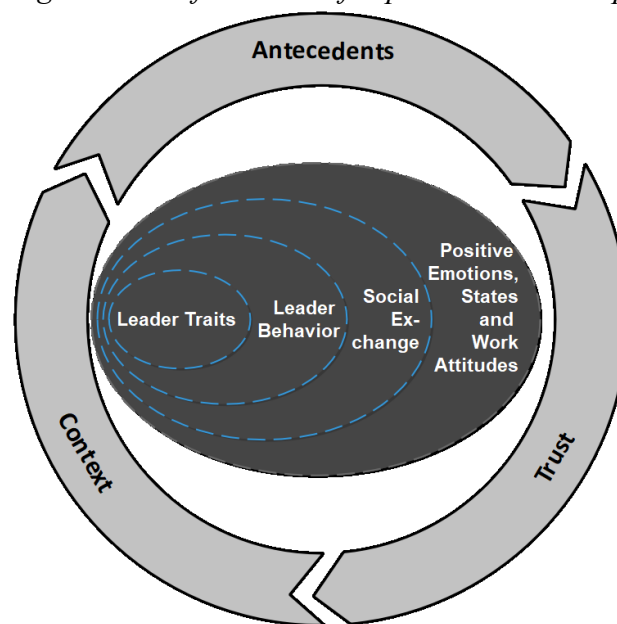


Source: Murphy & Louis, 2018

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[7] Murphy and Louis (2018) provide a detailed review of the leader-member exchange research.

We also have examples from our own research on caring leadership in schools that affirm elements of this model (Louis & Murphy, 2017; Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016). Our perspective on caring attends to behaviors and relationships, such as paying attention to an individual teacher's particular work circumstances, authenticity in exchanges, and reciprocity, or the acknowledgment that relationships are mutual rather than unidirectional. Where a national sample of teachers in the U.S. report that they have caring principals, they are also more likely to report that they are in *professionally rewarding relationships* with their colleagues (professional community, which supports motivation and performance). Teachers are also *more accountable*, in that they are likely to say that they have collective responsibility for students (as contrasted with personal responsibility in their particular classroom) and are *more focused on supporting students* in ways that are equitable. In other words, the leader behaviors and social exchanges that they have—often on a daily basis—with teachers in their buildings help to determine not only the individual's productivity but also the overall work climate of the school. A visual depiction of the results of our path analysis is shown below in figure 2.

*Figure 2: Effects of school leader caring for teachers*
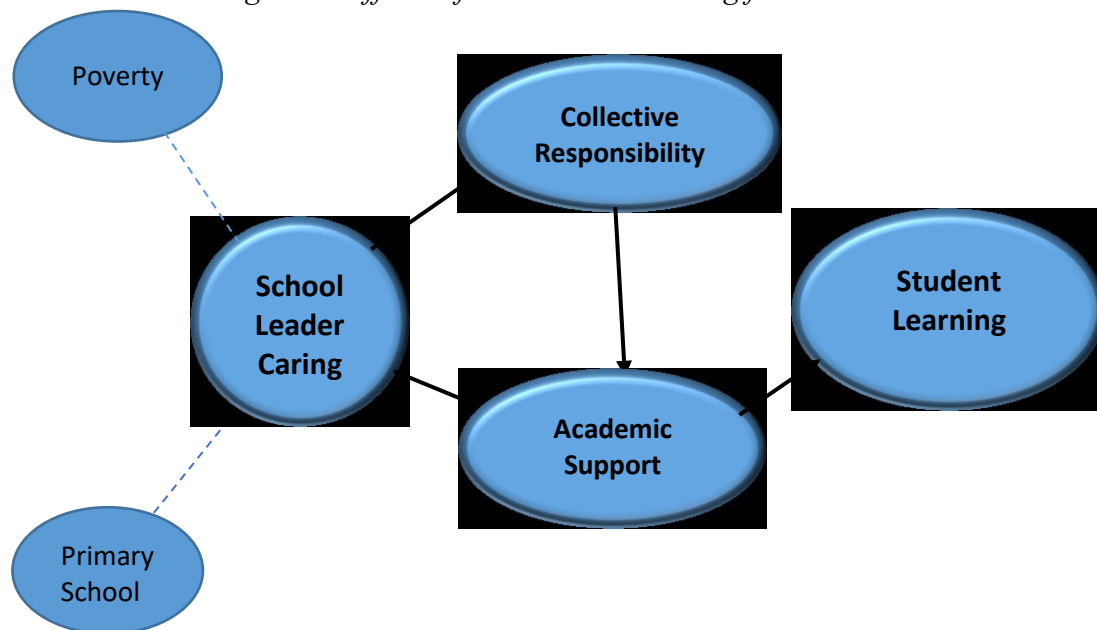


Source: Authors

Perhaps the most important finding in our survey-based studies is that positive leadership is not only about making organizational members feel affirmed, supported and more motivated in their work—it is also associated with important indicators of group productivity. In the case of schools, this means that measured student learning is higher (Louis, Murphy & Smylie, 2016) and teachers' experience of organizational learning (searching for, discussing and using new information to improve practice) is higher (Louis & Murphy, 2017).

The effects of leadership are not, however, direct, but occur because they change the climate and culture of the school. This finding is, of course, consistent with previous research that indicates that school leaders have an impact primarily because they change the characteristics of the working environment (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In this case, we have not examined how principals have a positive impact on students' experience of their work setting (the classroom), but other investigations suggest that they do (Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010). Among the most significant outcomes of positive leadership behaviors are:[8]

- *For individual teachers: positive* emotional *and psychological states*, including self-efficacy, psychological empowerment, and trust (Damanik & Aldridge, 2017; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008);
- *For individual teachers: positive orientations to work*, including innovating, risk-taking, and job crafting or job enlargement (Berg et al., 2013);
- *For school teams: positive climate and collective positive effect*, including ownership of team processes and work, collective efficacy, and a sense that the team's work is socially meaningful (Goddard & Salloum, 2012; Walumbwa et al., 2004);
- *For shorter-term organizational (school) outcomes*: collective commitment and engagement, increased retention and reduced absenteeism, sense of an ethical climate, denser social networks, shared sense of responsibility for student learning and achievement (Friedkin & Slater, 1994; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008);
- *For longer-term organizational (school) outcomes*: increased organizational citizenship behavior, adaptability and collective learning, higher stakeholder satisfaction and student learning (Geijsel, Sleegers, Stoel, & Krüger, 2009; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Somech & Ron, 2007).


## Discussion

The outlines of our argument emphasize a layering of leadership effects that build on a base of values, leader behaviors, positive states and work attitudes, and the development of the school:

- What positive school leaders do is based on *authentic knowledge and understanding* of staff members;
- Positive school leaders understanding is developed out of *attentiveness to well-being;*
- Positive school leaders actions and behavior are motivated *by supporting and developing others;*

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[8] These are summarized in detail in Murphy & Louis (2018) drawing from a broad base of research in a variety sectors. Citations are only examples.

- Positive school leaders actions and behavior toward individuals have a *broad impact on the work environment* of schools, particularly collaborative teacher relationships;
- Which subsequently increases *desired outcomes* of the collective work.

We conclude that it is not possible for a school leader to have an impact on student learning unless they solidify the base that supports broader, positive school development. A visual depiction of the argument shows our conclusion that it is not possible for a school leader to have an impact on student learning unless they work on solidifying the base that supports school development. This is shown in figure 3.

*Figure 3: Summary model for positive school leadership*



*Source: Authors*

We base this summary model largely on studies that focused on formal leaders—those with supervisory authority. However, it is also consistent with deep lines of research in both education and other sectors that point to the wide range of formal and informal leadership roles that exist in any modern organization. What we know is that if we wish to enlarge the arena of organizational members who see themselves as being influential and responsible for the common good, we must first ensure that the foundations—formal leaders who represent principles, values, and attributes that are esteemed by others, and who seek to develop positive relationships with members—are present. Where they are miss-

ing or inconsistent, distributing or sharing positive leadership at other levels will be difficult. While it will always be true that an effective school is impossible without good teachers, in the absence of positive leaders, the best teachers will struggle or leave the profession.[9]

We have emphasized the importance of leader-member relationships as a basis for positive school environments, but it also suggests that substituting the word *leader* with the word *teacher* would be appropriate and consistent with that a strong foundation will lead to wider outcomes, whether student learning or enhanced capacity to collaborate with other social institutions.

## Preparing for the work

A problem, in our view, is that school leaders are rarely selected or prepared to reflect this model. In recent years, most countries have adopted policy language that reflects a neo-liberal new public management perspective in education (Louis & van Velzen, 2012). Even in the Nordic countries, where assumptions about the schools' responsibility for child development reflects a more holistic perspective (*Bildung*), there has been increased emphasis on leader-driven responsibility for student learning (Moos, Krejsler, & Kofod, 2008).

Jarl, Fredriksson and Persson (2012) argue that this has led to increased professionalization of the principal's role in Sweden, but in other countries concerns are raised about lack of attention in school leader development to the issues raised in this paper (Dempster, Freakley, & Parry, 2001; Jarl, Fredriksson, & Persson, 2012). In addition, the increasingly technical nature of the work under conditions of increased accountability (such as data-driven decision making) has meant that even in preparation programs that incorporate holistic perspectives and reflection, participants' expressed needs focus on technical knowledge (Woods, Woods, & Cowie, 2009).

In the United States, one review of current principal preparation programs suggested that

> effective principal preparation ought to include considerable attention to accountability, managing with data, and utilizing research; to hiring, recruiting, evaluating, and terminating personnel; to overseeing an effective instructional program; and to exposing candidates to diverse views regarding educational and organizational management. (Hess & Kelly, 2007, p. 247)

This quote reflects a perspective that school leadership is like managing any government office rather than a unique position that incorporates responsibility for both children and the adult members who usually have a calling (Grant, 2007).

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[9] It is beyond the scope of this paper to review research on teacher retention, but there is increasing attention to the role of the principal in decisions to leave the profession (Boyd et al., 2011; see also Böhlmark, Grönqvist, & Vlachos, 2012).

But these contrasting views must temper any simple conclusion that anyone who is good at relationships will be a good school leader. We suggest that there is an urgent need to consider how best to balance the two imperatives that drive a value-based positive leadership agenda. Realistically, school leaders must play two roles, providing (1) developmental support for personal growth and collective flourishing, along with the equally pressing need to (2) reinforce expectations for student learning that reflect society's best guess as to what students will need to know and be able to do when they leave school. Each country grapples with this challenge but at least in our experience, these roles and objectives are often seen as distinct or in conflict.

A positive school leadership perspective can, we submit, be a way of integrating them, by keeping the school leader's eyes firmly on the well-established finding that both adult and children's development occurs primarily in a social environment. This means that all members must be embedded in relationships that support their reflection and application of what they know in safe settings, where small failures are viewed as opportunities rather than causes for alarm. We agree with Grant (2007), who claims that, "despite the evidence that employees are motivated to make a positive difference in other people's lives, the organizational literature is relatively silent about the sources of this motivation" (p. 393) and goes on to state that positive motivation "is an inherently relational phenomenon; interpersonal relationships both cultivate and result from the motivation to make a prosocial difference" (p 394). We also argue that most school leaders, even those who are emotionally intelligent, have limited experience in thinking about how to design work settings that will reinforce rather than sap the energy and commitment that teachers and students bring with them to school.

We have nothing against school leaders knowing the basics of human resource management, budgeting, and teacher evaluation practices. They should, of course. But they should be selected because they already demonstrate proficiency in building relationships and creating effective teams. Further development, even when it has a technical component (such as knowing how to look at data) must be embedded in a value-centered, relational frame.

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