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An Exploration of Principal as Spiritual Leader

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**Knowledge, Leadership and the Role of Spirituality:
An Exploration of Principal as Spiritual Leader**

Introduction

Recent scholarship (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki & Portin, 2010; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Anderson et al., 2010) demonstrates the impact of school leadership on student success. Using the research model of the ISSPP (Day, 2010), a team of researchers utilized a dynamic approach to identify leadership practices and beliefs that could be attributed to rises in student achievement and diminishing achievement gaps. In this paper, we present a cross-case analysis of three elementary schools in the southeastern US. Our findings highlight one particular aspect of these practices and beliefs: spirituality.

As part of the International Successful School Principals' Project (ISSPP; Jacobson & Day, 2007), we sought to determine "what *successful* ... principals do in today's demanding accountability context" (Leithwood & Day, 2007, p. 2, emphasis author). The ISSPP has collected global case studies of success stories from Australia, Denmark, England, Cyprus and the United States, among others, that demonstrate principals' significant influence on school improvement (Day, Jacobson & Johansson, 2011; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011). As a starting point for analysis we utilized four categories of leadership practices: building vision and setting direction, understanding and developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning program (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Walstrom, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005)

During our investigation into three elementary school principals' practices, aspects of overlapping spirituality and care-based ethics became evident. A cursory explanation might locate this phenomenon in a geographic space because these schools sit in the United States'

Bible Belt. Yet, other literature suggests that leaders' morals, ethics, and virtues provide the foundation of effective school leadership (Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 2003; Strike, 2007). Further, Dantley (2003a, 2003b, 2010) and others (Scanlan, 2011) have identified *critical spirituality* as a leadership practice that highlights the role of reflection on teleological and ontological beliefs within leadership practice. This paper offers insight into the spirituality of three elementary school principals in the Southeastern U.S.

Spirituality and Leadership

Before going on to describe some of the scholarship on leadership practices and spirituality, first, we must describe the term *spirituality* so as to be clear regarding the ways in which it informs the leadership practices of the elementary school principals in our study. In this section, we outline our approach to spirituality. Then, we give a brief overview of the ways in which varying concepts of spirituality have been invoked in literature on leadership practices in schools.

Describing Spirituality. The concept of spirituality in school leadership has not been deeply explored in the U.S. literature. The U.S. Constitutional Bill of Rights supports the individual free exercise of religion, but judicial decisions constrict the practice of religion in public schools. This context may have restricted scholarly investigations of spirituality among school leaders, and more importantly, also may have directed this conceptualization of spirituality as differentiated from theology or religiosity. The few definitions available are explicit on the point that spirituality is not necessarily connected to formal religious identification or religious practices (Fry, Hannah, Noel & Walumba, 2011; Purpel, 2004). This separation of spirituality from religion recognizes the institutional character of religion and the

ethereal, symbolic and transformative nature of spirituality. As Dantley (2008) explained, it is important to separate spirituality from religion:

Religion serves to codify, regulate, and normalize particular spiritual experiences.

Religion emphasizes conformity and adaptive behaviors. Spirituality, however, inspires creativity, inquiry and transformative conduct” (p. 454)

Another tentative point arising in the emergent dimensions of spirituality suggests that it differs from accounts of moral leadership (as defined by Sergiovanni, 1992) or servant leadership (as described by Greenleaf, 1977) in that spirituality encourages reflection and the confrontation of inner motivations, whereas theories of moral or servant leadership compel normative acts, and may lead to performative role enactment without accompanying insight (Ball, 2003; Beatty, 2007; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Lumby, 2009). Interlaced throughout this conceptualization of spirituality is an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1993; 2006; Noddings, 1984; 2002; 2005).

For this paper, then, spirituality refers to the interconnection of people through transcendent beliefs. While Christianity was predominantly represented in our fieldwork at two of the three elementary cases, our references to spirituality should not evoke representations of any particular faith. We draw on Dantley’s (2003a, 2003b, 2010) formulation of *critical spirituality* in educational leadership, in which he combined African American prophetic leadership with critical theory. He explained that “critical spirituality dares to require school leaders to deal with their personal ontology and purpose for being educators in light of a broader teleology and ontology of the wider society” (Dantley, 2010, p. 516). Thus, critical spirituality focuses on educators on educators’ understandings of why and how they exist, their choices to enact a purposeful existence, as well as to question and consider the messages that they

encounter about education at large. This conceptualization focuses on the reflection of individuals as they strive to give meaning to the work that they do.

Simultaneously with the rise of achievement-driven educational policy, educational leadership literature erupted with calls to clarify moral and ethical dimensions of school leadership (Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 1992; Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Starratt, 2003, 2004; Stefkovich, 2006; Strike, 2007). Alongside these calls, and in some cases, driving the critiques, scholars noted the mechanistic tenets of these policies and the resulting compliance and/or passive enactment of them despite many unintended and untoward consequences (Ball, 2003; Beatty, 2007; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Lumby, 2009; Papa & English, 2011; Perryman, 2006). While the criticisms decried performativity roles, these analyses also revealed leadership as a unique service for communities and schools (Crippen, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Greenleaf, 1977; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 2003, 2004). Other works approached these concepts as heuristics for school leaders' practices (Fullan, 2003; Shapiro & Gross, 2008; Stefkovich, 2006; Strike, 2007). And among these works, many also suggested ethics and morals as sustenance for leaders through tough times (Alston, 2005; Dantley, 2008; Greenleaf, 1977; Shapiro & Gross, 2008). While differentiation of spirituality from religion may be a useful contribution of this literature, the conceptualization of spirituality and its connection to school leadership remains in its early phases of scholarship.

Scholars have linked the work of educators and care-based ethics (Gilligan, 1984; Noddings, 1984, 2002; 2005, 2006). As the name suggests, care-based ethics explain the ways that dilemmas can be solved and decision can be made based on the relationships that individuals develop. Care-based ethics began with feminist philosophers like Gilligan (1984) and Held (1993; 2006) delineating between masculine and feminine ways of making decisions. Gilligan

(1984) explained “women make a series of connections that lead them to understand what happened” (p. 452). Noddings noted the feminist origins of the notion of care as an ethic, but pushed the definition to its fundamental contributions as mutual responsibility among the *carers* and especially the *cared-fors* which provides the connective matter of social interactions (Noddings, 1984; 2002; 2012). Noddings (2012) delineated four aspects of caring as an educative curriculum: (a) modeling, (b) dialogue, (c) practice, and (d) confirmation. These approaches emphasize the connections that individuals have with one another as an underlying rationale for decision making as well as for preserving and improving civic interactions and the social development provided by schooling.

Spirituality in Schools. The concept of spirituality has emerged within educational leadership literature as propositions and recommendations, only some of which is anchored by fieldwork. These formulations of spirituality inform the way in which our analysis approaches to concept of spirituality. In this section, we briefly explain some of the ways spirituality has been identified through fieldwork.

Dantley (2003a, 2003b, 2010, 2011) has championed the concept of critical spirituality for over a decade through conceptual papers, speeches and essays; however, little empirical work has been done with the concept. Studies that have evoked the term *critical spirituality* often come at it from the perspective of race, ethnicity or the particular approaches of African American leaders (Alston, 2005; Cooper, 2009; Evans, 2007; Witherspoon & Taylor, 2010), social activism and social justice (Hoffman, 2009; Ryan, 2006; Scanlan, 2011) or the particular practices of leaders within a Catholic school context (Banke, Maldonado & Lacey, 2011; Scanlan, 2011).

Methods

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger project to identify particular leadership practices that lead to increased student achievement in one state of the southeastern U.S. CCES is one of seven project cases and one of three focused on elementary schools.

Research was collected in three phases (1) selection of cases (2) site visits and (3) analysis.

Cases were selected from among schools with a poverty index of at least 80% that had experienced student achievement gains during current principals' tenure, set at a minimum of four years. We identified cases via two concurrent strategies: (a) recommendations from district-level throughout the state and (b) two regression models were generated based on predicted school achievement and earned scores from the state's accountability index. Potential cases were stratified by the state's three geographic regions and the combined strategies yielded two or three schools in each region. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the three elementary schools selected as case studies. The schools' names and all personal names are pseudonyms selected either by the participants or the researchers.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Three Elementary Cases

Characteristic	Live Oak Grove Academy (LOGA)	Culsaseehee Crossroads Elementary School (CCESS)	Sandy River Elementary School (SRES)
Geographic Region	Mid-state	Upstate	Coastal-Low Country
School/Grade Levels	K3 through 5 th	K through 6 th	PK through 5 th

Characteristic	Live Oak Grove Academy (LOGA)	Culsaseehee Crossroads Elementary School (CESS)	Sandy River Elementary School (SRES)
School Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 676 children • 43 teachers • 85.89% poverty • Near downtown of middle of the state, population= 67,000 • Test scores exceed district & state avg. across all 4 tested content • Met 21 of 21 AYP goals • Is now a school of choice for the district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 291 Students • 21 Teachers • 76.61% poverty • Rural farming town • Distinct SES divide and poverty • Test scores exceed district & state avg. across all 4 tested content • Met 13 out of 13 AYP goals • Blue Ribbon Winner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 776 students • 42 Teachers • 84.43% poverty • Situated in a town of approximately 17,000 • Test scores exceed state avg. across all 4 tested content • Met 20 out of 21 AYP goals • Won Closing the Achievement Gap Award for 2008-2009 school year
Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 years as principal • Taught in the school and attended it as a child • One of six daughters, rural farming family • Bachelors degree from a religiously affiliated liberal arts institution • Masters degrees from In-state University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 years at school • Masters Degree at In-state university • Known in the community • From a challenging personal background • Modest about success and attributes it to others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 years at SRES • Masters Degree from In-state University

In Phase Two, 2- to 3-days school visits were made. During these visits, principals arranged for research team members to observe activities, collect documents, and conduct stakeholder interviews. Semi-structured interviews and a follow-up, online questionnaire generated perceptions of the principal and other school characteristics. Principals participated in two interviews: one, as the research team entered the site, and the other, as the team prepared to exit.

Finally, interview transcripts were subjected to content analysis (Grbich, 2007) according to the ISSPP's analysis framework (Day, 2010). Initially, team members participated in “qualitative coding, the process of defining what the data are about . . . the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). As the analysis proceeded for the three elementary schools, all showed similar features among stakeholders' allusions to their commitment to students.

These allusions revealed ways that spirituality entered into perceptions of the school and the principal (i.e. codes of parable, definition of a good person, and meanings inherent in living a good life). This set of first-cycle codes raised questions about the elementary cases (Saldaña, 2009). An investigation of religion, schools, and spirituality offered some concepts for a second-cycle *theoretical coding* process (Saldaña, 2009). For the purposes of further exploration, we took an initial step in *theoretical sampling*, by narrowing our analysis to a single elementary case (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By using this approach, we bounded a unit of analysis to permit deeper exploration of the data for aspects of spirituality. This exploration was definitional for further coding, but also generative of further data collection for this case, and others (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These theoretic codes were then applied across all three of the elementary cases.

Results

The first-cycle coding generated three themes: (a) an overall school and community-wide commitment to student success, (b) specific contributions to student success from multiple community sectors (parents, businesses, churches), and (c) a dominant parable about success, the principal's own story. After these codes and quotes, a set of propositional definitions based on the theoretical sampling of this case is offered.

First-Cycle Themes

Three themes emerged across all elementary schools despite some differences in the local context and principals' personalities. Arguably, all of these cases are located in the U.S. Bible Belt, which in recent years has undergone a strong rebirth of conservative political values based on fundamental tenets of Christianity. These three elementary school principals live in a variety of communities from cities of 27,000 to less than 10,000. They work in schools in communities of 27,000 to less than 4,000. Even the smallest community includes three different churches all within walking distance of the school. Despite the potential for factional conflict among these differing traditions, the three cases reveal common commitment to student success spearheaded by these principals. These principals also reached beyond schoolyard fences to enlist a variety of community participants and resources focused on students' needs and successes. Finally, but perhaps seminally, the principals connected with their schools' communities with their own stories of challenge and success inspiring and modeling resilience beyond the factors that could defeat them.

Commitment to Student Success

The interviews revealed a common commitment to student success, which may not seem very different from much of the research on successful schools. The differences here seemed to be that success was formulated on children's opportunities to lead a good life, not merely test-based achievements. Each of the schools face considerable challenges, but these challenges were not used as an excuse. The position leaders in the schools expressed that they had an opportunity to improve the lives of children. The treatment of students as individuals who all have the capacity to succeed resounded in the responses in each school. Additionally, a commitment was expressed in spiritual terms as love and protection as the following illustrative quotes show.

District Academic Officer: [the principal], ... is extremely modest and will attribute all of this success to her team. I think the best leaders take half the credit and twice

as much of the blame. If anything goes wrong she owns it. ... honestly in her heart ... she showers them with that support. If she could just give it all away she could. ... that pat on the back on a regular basis creates that culture and that climate of people that want to be here, that want to do what's best and by modeling that caring respect for them, they in turn model it with the students and their parents ... (DAOInt CCES)

Parent: ... I think she has the gift of understanding that every child deserves an education and it doesn't matter what your background is, where you're from, or who you are, but every child is important to her. ... she's quiet, deliberate, but she's tough ... She leads through a quiet strength, ... and her love ... one of the basis of Christianity, of being a Christian, is love ... (Parent 3rd4kInterview CCES)

Principal: Well I really think, and I think I shared this with y'all yesterday on the front porch, there are really two avenues I think that any person in life or in a classroom have to have, and they both start with A's. They have to be acknowledged. They have to know that you matter. They have to know that you're welcomed in this community. They have to know that you're there. They cannot be invisible. They have to be acknowledged and in that acknowledgement, that affirmation comes through, but on the other hand they have to be held accountable and they have to know that just because you are this that or the other, doesn't excuse you from excellence. In fact, it makes all the more reason why you must be held accountable (Principal LOGA)

Principal: Poverty is not an excuse. It really becomes the reason. ... It becomes the reason to improve oneself and that's really what's happened I believe. We have said, 'Why not us?' We have been a Title One school forever and ever, but behind that have been the people who have made a difference in the lives of children. We have embraced many programs, but it's not programs; it's people that made the difference. (Principal, LOGA)

Parent: She's [the principal is] about the children. She's about making sure that they are where she feels like they need to be. And if not, okay, let's – she'll pull one resource teacher. Okay, what do you think? Can you help? No. Can you tell me? Okay. Let me go try this. And she looks for ways to help maybe a group of students or an individual student. ... (Parent, SRES)

As demonstrated in the quotes, the principals from each school expressed a unique commitment to student success. Even amongst the multiple challenges that the schools, administrators, teachers and students face, the principals all expressed belief that each student

can succeed. The love for individual students and the students as a group was mentioned by each principal, and also was demonstrated in the community connections that were fostered by the school leaders.

Community Contributions

With expressions of commitment came community support in multiple forms. The school community permeated the physical boundaries of these campuses to link all aspects of families, businesses, other schools, and churches. The community assisted in mentoring students or assuring that children had enough food or heat in the winter. Tutoring was as much an aspect of mentoring students as encouragement or counseling students to better behavior. In turn, these schools served as staging areas for community groups and agencies in the provision of food and clothing to families in need. The quotes below demonstrate the unique bond between the institution and the community.

Parent: But, I mean, we never have a problem getting volunteers for anything. We usually have an abundance of people that are ready to do – – whatever you ask ‘em. You know,, you have people that are going to – ... you know you can call somebody and say we’ve got this going on, and we need this, and you’re going to have several people that are willing to help you out, you know, with that. (Parent focus group, LOGA)

Counselor ... we don't just look at the child academically; we look at that child as a whole. And we try to look at what are the emotional behavior needs of that child ... and family needs with being a very rural, low income community. ... Our churches here have been phenomenal. ... any need -- I could call them ... and they will help. So I think our churches probably [are] our greatest, greatest resource here. (CounselorInt CCES)

PTO coChair 2: Well, this particular school here, we are a community group. I’m in fire and EMS. We do different events up here for the school for fire, EMS. ... when a school’s not doing something for the community, usually the fire department or EMS is doing something for the school and the community. (PTO coChairs CCES)

Parent: Yeah. It's not academics. It's also values and taking pride in themselves and learning what they need to know other than academics. (Parent Focus Group, SRES)

4th grade Teacher But you take care of that need first. But you don't say, you can't learn. It's okay, let's go. Suck it up. Let's go. You know. Leave it at the door if you can. And when you're in that room you're safe. You can get food if you need it. If you need to lay your head down a minute, lay it down.

But when you're in there you're expected – you know what I'm saying? There's no excuse. No excuse for not learning. Because we're going to put it out there for you. But the empathy is tremendous at this school. If there's a need in the neighborhood, [the principal's] running food to a house. I mean we had children in common. ... So there's not an excuse through the poverty. (Teacher Focus Group, SRES)

The leadership in the schools acknowledged that the communities helped them, but that the schools also helped members of community. Fostering connections within the communities provided valuable resources for students in the form of volunteerism and human capital in disadvantaged areas. Members of the community were aware of the unique leadership in the schools, and even though the principals were not born and raised in the areas, they were treated as community insiders and many individuals referenced their unique backgrounds.

The Principal's Parable of Success

Among the allusions made in each school were those to the principal's own story of success. At Culsaseehee Crossroads Elementary, the principal's story was mentioned often. The following quotes offer the story in the principal's words and then show a parent's interpretation of it.

Principal: ... And on a personal note, I was a free lunch child. That was back in the day when you went through the lunch line ... that people saw if you had your card ... easily identified daily that my mom and dad can't pay. ... My dad ... had a massive heart attack. ... I will never forget it and some people thinking that because you carried that card, then that made a difference in what you could do. ... you know your value was attached to that card for some, not all ... It's wrong, so— ... there is no excuses, every kid can achieve. ... I think you should be called to this profession.

... you really should have a passion and want to do this. (A-MC PrinIntNo1 041311 CCES)

Parent 3rd and 4k : ... see to understand [the principal], her daddy died when she was younger and she grew up pretty tough and she'll tell you that she had a lunch card, she'll share that with you. She's not ashamed of it. And that's why it's so important that every child achieves because she has been able to do what she has done ... I think God puts you where he needs you. ... And he may have just seen fit to put her here .. with her love and her quiet strength ... to lead us to where we are. (Parent 3rd4kInt15 041311 CCES)

Additionally the principals of the schools modeled their behavior in a way that reflected humility and love for children. As demonstrated in quotes from the other two schools, the principals acted as role models to the entire organization in a way that fostered development and achievement.

Principal: the way you carry yourself, the way you speak is so important, because if we don't model that for them, they'll continue to be where they are. But our children are, yeah, they're so hungry, they so hungry for affirmation and that's what we have to give them. It's so important. ... I have high expectations for our teachers because I have high expectations for myself, and I would never ask them to do anything that I, myself, am not willing to do no matter if it's mopping a floor that's filled with water or serving on bus duty or cleaning a commode. I mean whatever needs to be done we've got to get it done. (Principal, LOGA).

Teacher: *And that's one thing I would say, and I'm sure [other teacher] has some experiences too, but I have worked in other places, and one thing that I would say of her [the principal] is she will not ask you to do anything that she truly will not go do. (Teacher, LOGA)*

Assistant Principal: They know that she's, and I don't think she'd mind me saying this, she's a hardworking country girl. She will roll up her sleeve and, I mean, I've seen her buffing floors, you know, mopping in preparation for this or that. And they know she will do whatever it takes to keep this school moving forward. ... She has excellent rapport with the parents. They trust her, so much ... (Assistant Principal, LOGA)

In the third school, the principals and the teachers saw themselves as strong women and shared a view that the principal's strength was passed to them and then through them to the students. The following sets of quotes show how the principal's words were echoed by a group of teachers discussing her model of strength.

Principal: Right – that we love the kids. And the teachers and the staff here know that me – my decision is going to be what’s best for the kids, and if I step on your toes, I’m sorry, but it’s what’s best for the kids (Principal, SRES)

First Grade Teacher: And she [the principal] doesn’t accept –

Kindergarten Teacher: Excuses.

First Grade Teacher: Excuses, even if it’s hard for you at first to take, whenever she sets the expectation, she doesn’t vary. She doesn’t waver. It’s this is the expectation and I’m not changing. And I think once we saw that, that made us push ourselves harder. It made us as teachers continue to stick to that – to the path that we wanted to go on. So it does drive you a lot.

Third Grade Teacher: It’s just like our kids. We set high expectations for them and they want to achieve it, you know. I think we do the same thing for them. (Teacher Focus Group, SRES)

The members of the organization knew and understood the unique background and style of each principal, which helped foster appreciation and respect for them. These principals also demonstrated the unique combination of strength and love for children while not tolerating excuses from others. It was evident to the individuals who were interviewed that the principals modeled appropriate behavior and exercised humility in their day-to-day actions.

Theoretic Codes: Propositions about Principals’ Spirituality

Grounded theory offers the researchers an opportunity to theorize from the explanations and insights offered by participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As a second cycle coding step, theoretic codes (Saldaña, 2009) were generated using a grounded approach. Three codes were constructed from reflection on the meaning of first cycle quotes and related literature on the significance of the principals’ views of their work.

1. Calling to Education. Others, dating as far back as Lortie (1975), have explained that school workers decide their occupation due to social inspiration as opposed to financial attraction. Among the features of a calling, is the foundational requirement of sacrifice

(Elias, 2003; Estola, Erkkilä & Syrjälä, 2003). Education as a calling requires financial sacrifice, but additional sacrifices are required as well (De Marzio, 2009). For the theoretic sampling cycle, the analyses include quotes about the requirements to work in the school as well as connections to the participants' lives and their sacrifices on behalf of the students and their families and communities.

2. Spirituality of Care. Noddings (1992; 2006) stimulated reflection on the meaning of educational work with pupils and colleagues. Care is related to concepts of sacrifice in teaching (De Marzio, 2009). For this theoretic code, participants' references to care of others and the meaning of that care were selected.
3. Spirituality of caring for the whole child and his/her family/community. This assertion rests on a positive corollary to the notion of deficit-thinking concerning student needs (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semington, 2008; García, & Guerra, 2004). The caring quotes led to analyses of responses that extended beyond fixing the needs of individuals or groups of children to a recognition that students' needs are connected to family issues or neighborhood incidents and conditions. All three schools included examples of how the school's work included and was interwoven with the community beyond the school walls, and the theoretic code here included those quotations.

Calling to Education

Each of the principals reflected on her involvement in education. They shared stories of their family origins and valuing of learning. They also mentioned the degree to which their husbands and children participated in their work as school leaders. Mostly though, they expressed a passion for education despite the challenges of underfunding and the many social

needs faced by their students and communities. Further these principals held an expectation that such passion must be shared by all teachers in their schools.

Principal: And all my family – they’re all educators. My mom and dad were teachers. My oldest brother is a principal, and his wife’s a teacher. My youngest brother is a teacher, and his wife’s a teacher. My youngest sister is an assistant principal, and her husband’s an assistant principal. So it’s kind of – ... in the blood, and it’s just genetic as it comes. And so I’m trying to get one of my children to major in education, and it’s not working, because my husband is a businessperson, and they all tend to go to the business side. (Principal initial interview, SRES)

Principal: I’ve said many times my parents were leading experts in psychology. They made working a privilege. ... I mean, teaching is not for the faint hearted. It’s for the men and women of true character. It’s the most important job there is. I mean, Christ, our savior, was a teacher. (Principal final interview, LOGA)

Principal: Initially I was making sure that all teachers were where they needed to be. I did some observations, and some were not as effective as they could be, and in some cases we had the right people, but not in right places. ...The last few moves were dependent on the budget, but some of the moves amounted to people who needed to have career counseling... There’s a calling for teaching, like nursing. ... Children have to know you care, and that’s it’s not about the pay check. Do you like children? (Final Principal Interview notes, CCES)

Spirituality of Care

The fundamental core of these principals’ passion for student success was an authentic and fervent commitment to every child’s successes. Their mission is a sacred trust in offering students an affirmation of their worth to the world. All of these principals have a fierce strength about them as they talked about their obligations to students. All of the adults, teachers, support staff, and parents, understand the principal knows them and more importantly knows every child and what she or he needs. Even the principal most singled out for her humility was also noted for her singular focus on ensuring each student’s welfare.

Principal: Because children, like all of us, and we’re all children, we’re just old children, I mean, that’s the only difference. We all need and desire and must have the same things. We have to have somebody who loves us. ...

and if we don't have that - and most children who misbehave feel as if no one loves them. That's why it's important to acknowledge them and to encourage them and to believe in them and know that I don't know what may come to you in your life, but I know where you are now and I want to support you now where you are. But they have to have somebody to love them. And if somebody loves them, they will do everything and anything to please that person, so those relationships are critical between teacher and student. And when that happens, then the relationships between the class members begin to grow and flourish, then they nurture and they continue to support and lift others and it becomes a beautiful cycle, not a vicious cycle but a beautiful cycle. (Final Principal Interview, LOGA)

Instructional Coach: She [the principal] sees the whole picture like [other coach] said. She knows everything. I don't know how, but that girl, she knows everything, everything, without sacrificing the individual of anybody. You know what I mean? She looks at that kid, and I've said it before about my own child, every kid like they're her own and I know she treats them like they're her own. She's a mother of three and she's had her children in school and each of those kids she knows about their broken ankles, she knows about their mom picking them up late. So she knows the whole picture and is great at seeing the whole picture without sacrificing the individual of her professional work or the student. You know what I mean? She's never forgot who they are or where they come from or just what they can be. (Coaches Interview Group, SRES)

Principal : ...it's up to me to get in front of, or between, anything that might harm a child, whether it's a poor teacher or a tornado... I'm not in your face about what needs to improve, but I am going to get my way. (Final Principal Interview, CCES)

Spirituality of Caring for the Whole Child and His/Her Family/Community

The principals have accomplished a sense of community through an inclusive approach to enlisting all adults' support in making life better for each and every student. The buy-in is complete in all three schools. This means that the educational professionals accept the value and contributions of parents and other community volunteers. They are as inclusive as the principals in valuing other adults' work in helping students succeed.

Instructional Coach 2: The climate and the atmosphere of this school, the sense of professionalism among teachers, the sense of community with the teachers, the parents, the students. ... It's just I guess infectious. It's an infectious feeling of positivity, of a want to do better, of a drive to succeed, of a sense of belonging, of a sense of community, constantly

wanting to do better, celebrating our successes but never dwelling in our successes, never resting on our laurels. (Coaches Interview Group, SRES)

Principal: We work on [parent involvement] all the time. And we try to encourage them when they come in – ... And when they come in, you know, you hug ‘em, you love ‘em, and once you build that rapport with them then you start working towards the academic issues. And a couple years ago, our new PTO board, that was their goal. They said, “You know, parents aren’t coming to the school. So there’s a reason, so let’s make it fun for them to come.” So everything we did was fun. There was not any instructional or academics tied to it. I know that may sound awful, but we had a softball game. We played ping-pong or Bingo. We did things just to get them to the school and say, “Look, we can have fun here. It’s not intimidating. C’mon out!” (Initial Principal Interview, SRES)

Principal: And I think we’re similar and our journey is similar to a concentric circle. We have the core, the foundation, and then it just radiates out to every community member and everybody wins because of that. But love is the center of it all and you have to treat people the way you want to be treated. You have to acknowledge them and everybody’s somebody. (Final Principal Interview, LOGA)

The three sections related to the grounded theory coding cycle described the calling to education, ethic of care and value of community members expressed by each principal. Though each of their contributions and backgrounds are unique, these three themes were evident in all of the schools. Each principal expressed a distinct calling to education, and believed that their teachers and staff members must also be called to teaching and putting the needs of children above adults. Stemming off of this calling comes the belief that each student is worthy of respect. The principals had the ability to see the whole child and whole situation, and acknowledged that with the proper attention, love, and care, each student had the ability to flourish. Finally, the principals had the ability to see the value in the unique contributions of community members, and were not afraid to ask for help.

Conclusion

This paper offers a grounded approach to expanding understanding about leadership in successful schools. The study identified spirituality as a common feature among the principals in successful schools. Two coding cycles revealed three grounded propositions about the ways in which spirituality manifested in the words of three principals and their colleagues and among parents and community members. The three propositions offered insights into the principals' and others perception of vocational nature (in a spiritual sense) of their roles and the responsibilities and obligations of schools to students, families and communities. A dominant aspect of this spirituality in their leadership was the intertwined nature of sacrifice and caring.

One implication for further study and perhaps a third cycle of coding is a deeper analysis of the respondents' words within Noddings (2012) components of care. That is, while the analysis of these principals and other participants' words about their leadership revealed a descriptive dimension of spirituality. The next step of these analyses should investigate the described behaviors of the principals in enacting the caring dimensions of their spiritual leadership. Noddings' components of (a) modeling, (b) dialogue, (c) practice, and (d) confirmation may serve as useful categories for examining this set of cases further.

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