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SCHOOL REFORM: LEADERSHIP THROUGH  
SHARED DECISION MAKING

by

Mary Juliet Martel

A dissertation in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

University of San Diego

1996

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## ABSTRACT

### SCHOOL REFORM: LEADERSHIP THROUGH SHARED DECISION MAKING

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DIRECTOR: Joseph C. Rost, Ph. D.

Educational reform has a long history and schools have gone through cycles of change. This study, however, focuses on the last ten years of reform, often referred to as the restructuring movement. Shared decision making is one of the fundamental changes promoted by this current reform effort. Restructuring the decision-making process to include teachers and parents is a significant change from the hierarchical process that has been in place in most of today's schools. It is time to recognize that schools are complex social institutions that experience change only through its people. By giving those closest to children a stronger voice, decisions would have a greater impact on making the needed changes.

This study explored one school that experienced significant change over the course of ten years. This research examines the changing roles of the principal, teachers, and parents as they participated in a shared decision-making process. The strong sense of community that evolved was the result of relationships that were built on trust and respect. The collective sense of responsibility that existed at Valencia Park Elementary School provided the opportunity for leaders and collaborators to practice Rost's postindustrial theory of leadership.

A qualitative methodology was used in this study. The case study included interviews, observations, and a review of district and school documents.

Through this methodology it was possible to discover how the strong sense of community evolved and how it brought about significant change.

The findings of this study indicate that for significant change to occur as a result of shared decision making, a new organizational structure and belief system must be in place, the scope of authority must be clearly delineated, and the critical role the principal plays in facilitating the process must be understood. The shift from a top-down to a shared model of decision making requires the stakeholders to create relationships that foster a collective sense of responsibility. This strong sense of community provides the opportunity for leaders and collaborators to pursue changes that reflect their mutual purposes which relate to meeting the needs of children.

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Dedicated to

My Mother and Father  
Lucille A. Martel and Romeo G. Martel

My Daughter  
Kate Meili Adolph

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## CHAPTER ONE

### STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

#### Introduction

During the last ten years since 1986 the public education system in the United States has been engaged in reform under a particular scrutiny, referred to as restructuring. Most people are aware of the rapid changes taking place in our society (generally in the area of technology), and realize the need to consciously change the way we organize schools as a way to promote student learning. "This century's movement into a high-technology Information Age demands a new kind of education and new forms of school organizations" (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 753). Society has changed and students need to be better prepared to enter the job market of the future. The work sites of tomorrow will require employees to think critically, to be creative, and to have the ability to seek new solutions to problems collaboratively. The school community--parents, educators, business and government agencies--have expressed concerns regarding the declining ability of high school graduates. The result of the scrutiny has been a push for educational reform. Educational reform has a long history and has gone through cycles of change. However, this study will focus on these last ten years of reform, often referred to as the restructuring movement.

*A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission, 1983) was one of several studies in the 1980s that pointed out the low achievement levels of students in the American schools. The report recommended longer school days, tougher requirements for graduation and an increase in homework. "Similar reforms of the 1970s tried to 'teacher-proof' schooling by centralizing textbook adoptions, mandating curriculum guides for each grade level and subject area, and developing rules and tests governing how children should be tracked into programs and promoted from grade to grade" (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 754). These reform efforts are top-down bureaucratic attempts to change schools from the outside by institutionalizing specific policies and procedures. These efforts are focused on improving existing systems rather than reforming existing systems.

During the 1990s three reports presented guidelines for educational reform at the three levels of the American education system: *It's Elementary* (Elementary Grades Task Force, 1992) focused kindergarten through the fifth grade, *Caught in the Middle* (Middle Grades Task Force, 1987) grades sixth through eighth, and *Second to None* (High School Grades Task Force, 1992) examined grades nine through twelve. In each of the reports there is an emphasis on making changes in the areas of curriculum, teaching and learning strategies, and in the ways decisions are made--giving parents and teachers a voice in making decisions about school policy. It is this decentralized decision-making structure that is the focus of this study.

The major activities of school reform have focused on program and curriculum changes, developing different teaching strategies to meet the needs of a changing student population, and exploring alternative methods of scheduling classes. The hope was that these changes would enhance student achievement. Many of these reforms have repeated themselves. The more

experienced teachers are often heard saying, "we tried that program or strategy in the 1960s or 1970s, why are we repeating the same efforts again today?" Many believe pumping money and new programs into schools from the top without involving school site personnel in the decision-making process does not appear to be the answer. Many also believe it is time to recognize that a school is a complex social organization that will realize significant change only through its people. Further, many also believe that if school districts were to shift more of the decision-making power out to individual school sites, those closest to the classroom would have a stronger voice in creating change. Restructuring the decision-making process to include teachers and parents would be a significant change from the piecemeal, hierarchical, or centralized processes that are in place in most of today's schools.

#### Restructuring Education

Decentralized decision making is one of the fundamental changes promoted by the current restructuring movement. Conley (1992b) defined restructuring as "activities that change fundamental assumptions, practices, and relationships, both within the organization, and between the organization and the outside world, in ways that lead to improved and varied student learning outcomes for essentially all students" (p. 4). Historically speaking, educational reform efforts are typically in response to concerns about the state of society and the economy. Schools are viewed as the institutions that need to be changed to meet the new demands of society.

Restructuring has been referred to as the second wave of reform. After the 1983 National Commission on Excellence on Education's *A Nation at Risk* came out, the initial reform efforts were "a patching and repairing of the existing educational enterprise in what is generally regarded as the standard-raising movement or wave one reforms" (Murphy & Hallinger, 1993, p. 5).

After the first wave of reforms were institutionalized and their limits scrutinized, there seemed to be a need to develop new strategies to meet the demands of a postindustrial society. "The demands for restructuring are also supported by the desire to repair an ever widening tear in the social fabric of the nation--a gash that threatens 'our national standard of living and democratic foundations' (Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development, 1989, p. 27) and promises to overwhelm schooling" (Murphy, 1993, p. 6). The increase in the number of children living in poverty, the number of children coming from single parent homes, and the rapid growth in the number of students whose primary language is other than English have contributed to the changing complexion of today's classrooms. Preparing students for a postindustrial society while at the same time attempting to meet the needs of a changing student population will require an overhaul of most of the major aspects of a school. The restructuring reform movement is a call for drastic new strategies. "Educators are coming to realize that restructuring requires a systems perspective" (Conley, 1992b, p. 1). In addition to systemic changes, Conley identified four other key issues in restructuring: (1) an emphasis on outcomes desired by employees, (2) schools as open systems, (3) principals and power, and (4) the challenge of the at-risk student.

As the demands for significant change are heard, it is important to note the difference between improvement of the educational system and restructuring the educational system. Improvement occurs within the existing systems by focusing on doing the same things better with the intent of changing the performance of individuals. "Restructuring is aimed at changing systems so that new types of performances will be possible and encouraged and new or different outcomes can be produced" (Schlechty, 1993, p. 4). One of the ways to change systems is to involve the stakeholders in the decision-making

process. Site-based management is one of the components of the restructuring movement that distinguishes it from past reform efforts. Murphy & Hallinger (1993) pointed out that restructuring is not a new phenomenon. It is, on the one hand, the result of the one hundred year cycle of educational reform. On the other hand, some aspects of the restructuring movement such as site-based management, shared decision making, and teacher professionalism have their own history. The demand for site-based management and shared decision making to play a significant role in school reform has only existed for the last ten years, since 1986.

#### Site-Based Management

The education reform efforts in the late 1980s and 1990s emphasized experimenting with decentralized decision-making structures such as site-based management and shared decision making (Darling-Hammond, 1993). Even though recent reform efforts have encouraged the implementation of a decentralized decision-making structure, it has not been institutionalized as intended. In her review of the literature on the effects of site-based management, Priscilla Wohlstetter, director of the school-based management research project at the University of Southern California, found "there were no findings of change because there was, at best, partial implementation" of the practices needed to make site-based management effective (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994, p. 4). Often the stakeholders are not involved in making decisions that will have an impact on needed changes in the classroom. Malen and Ogawa conducted a study on site-based management in 1988 and found "that despite formal policy-making authority that gave teachers and parents substantial control over decision making, influence relationships traditionally found in schools were



maintained and principals retained control" (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992, p. 534).

There is much more to site-based management than school districts simply informing schools that they should implement shared decision making. In 1990 the San Diego Unified School District, in an effort to institutionalize shared decision making, required each school in the district to form a school governance team and to write a school governance document. Valencia Park Elementary School, the school selected for this study, is part of the San Diego Unified School District. The governance teams include representation from certificated and classified staff, administration, parents and the community. The purpose of the new school governance structure is to encourage principals to involve stakeholders in the decision-making process. However, having a document and a governance team in place does not mean that the stakeholders will have a voice in making decisions that have an impact on student achievement. Several factors that are necessary to make site-based management effective are: (1) both administrators and teachers need new knowledge and skills, (2) leadership roles need to be clearly delineated, (3) teachers and administrators need time to use their new knowledge and skills, and (4) teachers should be compensated for the additional time (Conley, 1992a; Flanagan & Richardson, 1991; Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992).

In addition, site-based management and shared decision making require a collaborative effort of the major stakeholders of the organization. Schools are complex social organizations designed for the primary purpose of student achievement. The changing demographics of California, and more specifically San Diego County, have contributed to creating classrooms that are much more demanding of the educational system. During the last ten years the student population in San Diego County has increased by 36%, the

number of nonwhite students has increased by 71%, the number of limited English speaking students has increased by 125%, and the number of students whose families receive AFDC has increased by 77% ("S.D.'s Changing," 1994). Because the changes necessary to affect student achievement will need to occur in the classroom and considering the statistics above, it is imperative that classroom teachers be a part of the decision-making process. Teachers have many of the answers concerning the needed reforms that could facilitate increased student achievement. Due to the fact that teachers work daily with students, fostering relationships through the process of teaching, they should have more control over the conditions of instruction in schools (Conley, 1992a). Teachers need someone to reach *out* to them instead of down and ask them the questions. "Top-down directives are based on the presumption that teachers cannot be trusted to make sound decisions about curriculum and teaching" (Darling-Hammond, 1993, p. 755).

Principals can make a difference in improving student achievement by initiating a process that brings the stakeholders together and asks the right questions. The real problems facing schools today do not emerge because there does not exist a means for continual collegial inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 1993). Traditionally, the principal has been perceived as the one with the ultimate authority to run the school and teachers and parents have looked to them for direction and guidance. Generally speaking this element of decision making has not changed; since the principal is still the person to whom the staff turns for the answers. For this reason the principal has the responsibility to create the environment that fosters involvement of the stakeholders in the decision-making process.

### The Changing Role of the Principal

The key to successful shared decision making is the principal (Flanagin & Richardson, 1991; Kirby & Colbert, 1994; Mizell, 1994). From a historical perspective, the management of schools has been top-down and still is in many school districts. However, the recent wave of reform supports a flattening of the hierarchical structure, shifting the power for decision making out to include the teachers and parents. This flattening is a shift in decision making that will require significant changes in the structure and the culture of the school. Attitudes and behaviors of the teachers, parents, and administrators will need to change. Initially, as a school moves from a hierarchical form of governance to a shared form, the principal will need to initiate the process. "The degree to which school-level authority is shared and how it is shared is in the hands of the principal" (Flanigan & Richardson, 1991, p. 10).

A flattening to achieve decentralized decision making requires the principal to manage and lead differently. Effective shared decision making requires the principal to: (1) be knowledgeable about the change process (Fullan & Miles, 1992), (2) recognize that making the transition from one form of decision making to another will require a significant amount of time, (3) provide the school community with a professional development program that will train staff in the shared decision-making process, and most importantly, (4) sustain a climate of cooperation by developing trusting relationships with the school staff and by demonstrating a willingness to share leadership. "The principal's role shifts from *prescribing substance* to *facilitating processes* in which substance can be discovered" (Reitzug, 1994, p. 304).

As the designated leader of the school, the principal still has the authority and the responsibility to raise the academic achievement of all the students. But, by initiating and facilitating a shared decision-making process, the principal actively involves teachers and parents into a process that will identify school-based barriers to learning and honestly address them. Hard questions are posed regarding what needs to change in order for individuals and groups of students to succeed (Darling-Hammond, 1993). This flatter process of decision making is very different from the top-down model used for so long in our school system. "Shared decision making embodies the idea the decision can best be made at the lowest level in the organization or closest position to the problem, preferably where this can lead to solutions" (Flanigan & Richardson, 1991, p. 12). Shared decision making challenges principals, teachers, and parents to engage less hierarchically in the process of leadership, such as that supported by the Comer model, as inspired by pediatrician Dr. James Comer of Yale University.

#### The Comer School Development Program

One reform effort that has attempted to change the way schools are organized and managed is the Comer School Development Program, initially designed to address the needs of children in inner city schools. "Traditionally, schools have not been organized and managed to allow for the empowerment and full participation of parents and staff as true partners in addressing children's psychoeducational and developmental needs" (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996, p. xvii). In an effort to involve the school staff and parents in the decision-making process, the Comer program provides the stakeholders with an organizational structure and philosophical foundation from which to begin the reform effort. In addition to emphasizing a system's approach to managing and organizing a school, the

program stresses the importance of creating relationships among the stakeholders that are built on trust and respect. "The School Development Program produces desirable outcomes only after a cooperative and collaborative spirit exists throughout the school" (Comer et al, 1996, p. 9). The network of relationships that may result from this cooperative and collaborative spirit provides the opportunity for leadership.

#### An Opportunity for Leadership

James MacGregor Burns was among the first scholars to conceptualize leadership as a process. In his book, *Leadership*, Burns (1978) described leadership as transformational.

The function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely to activate them, to commingle needs and aspirations and goals in a common enterprise, and in the process make better citizens of both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978, p. 461).

Since that time many leadership scholars have applied this concept of leadership to their understanding of leadership, and by doing so have further advanced the notion of leadership as a process involving relationships. Foster (1989, p. 49) wrote that "certain agents can engage in transformative practices which change social structures and forms of community, and it is this that we label leadership." The definition of leadership that I will examine in this study was written by Rost and described in detail in his book, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*. Inspired by the work of Burns, Rost defined leadership as: "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (1991, p. 102). I chose Rost's definition of leadership because it is clearly stated and can easily be applied to collaborative activities, such as shared decision making, that may exist in some organizations. Rost emphasized the need for

leadership scholars and practitioners to clarify what leadership is "so that people are able to label it correctly when they see it happening or when they engage in it" (1991, p. 6). Although Burns and Foster implied that leadership is a process of relationships, I feel Rost's definition, from a practitioner's point of view, is more appropriate for this case study.

Rost's understanding of leadership requires that relationships between people be established, and that the intended outcome of the relationship be mutual. The intention of shared decision making is student achievement and the intended outcome is decided through a shared process of decision making. Thus, the opportunity to create influence relationships must be present in these change efforts.

In Rost's definition of leadership there is a significant shift from one person making changes to the possibility that many people could have a voice, with the emphasis on developing influence relationships that will result in needed change. In shared decision making the intention is to move from a hierarchical model of school governance to one that reaches out and empowers parents and teachers to become part of the decision-making process. Under this model the principal shares his/her decision making authority, recognizing that teachers and parents have important contributions to make that will affect teaching and learning. The principal becomes a facilitator and a participant rather than the sole authority figure. A shared decision provides an opportunity for leadership among administrators, teachers, and parents in a collaborative effort to create change. Because of the similarities that seem to exist between shared decision-making processes and Rost's definition of leadership, exploring these two processes in a case study seems appropriate.

### Purpose of the Study

During the last decade there has been considerable emphasis on decentralized decision making as one method to facilitate school reform. By forming school governance teams and using a shared decision-making process to plan and implement needed change, schools have the opportunity to enhance student performance. Because teachers are closest to the classroom, their input is essential, and because parents play a critical role in the development of their children, they must be involved in the process. While, the intention of shared decision making is to improve student achievement, the purpose of this research is not to show a relationship between shared decision making and student achievement. Such a relationship might be a suitable topic for another study. However, the process of shared decision making needs to be more clearly defined and better understood in order to determine its potential for fostering student improvement.

The purpose of this research is to examine the changing roles of the principal, teachers, and parents within a decentralized, flattened decision-making structure, specifically exploring the nature of the leadership relationships that are created within such a decision-making process. Through a case study approach I examine the governance process of Valencia Park Elementary School, one of the schools in the San Diego Unified School District that has experienced significant changes over a ten year span.

I formulated five research questions to guide my research.

1. What relationship behaviors were exhibited by the school governance team and the principal?
2. Which were influence behaviors used in the shared decision-making process?

3. To what extent were teachers, parents, and classified staff involved in the decision-making process?
4. What changes did the governance team intend to make regarding teaching and learning and what changes have been implemented?
5. Were the changes mutually agreeable to the people in the relationship?

#### Significance of the Study

This study examines one critical aspect of the educational reform efforts emphasized between 1983, when a *Nation at Risk*: was published, and the present time. Decentralized decision making, site-based management, and shared decision making are the terms used for describing the democratization of public education, the focus of this study. National test scores and the continuing dialogue focused on the need for educational reform indicate that the efforts of the 1970s and 1980s have not brought about the needed changes. "Proposed 'fixes' for schools in trouble have too often centered on national standards, higher teacher salaries, tighter security, more discipline, voucher systems, and more required time and courses in school. For the most part, these are a call to do *more*, or do *better*, what our schools have always tried to do" (Lappe & Du Bois, 1994, p. 201). These efforts are focused on improving existing systems rather than reforming existing systems. The evidence today indicates that these efforts have not worked and the call is for a revolution. "To turn the tide, we need a fundamental, bone-jarring, full-fledged, 100% revolution that discards the old and replaces it with a totally new performance-driven system" (Gerstner, 1995, p. 9A). The recent effort to reform education has raised fundamental questions: Can changes in the decision-making process have a positive effect on student performance? What is the scope of authority for the principal, teachers, and parents?



Our schools have become much too complex for one person to have all the answers. A paradigm shift from a hierarchical model of decision making to one that invites participation from all the stakeholders is revolutionary. Lappe & Du Bois (1994) described several schools that are succeeding by creating changes in school governance. "We discovered that at the very heart of their success is the creation of *a culture of shared responsibility*" (p. 202). School districts across the country have attempted to create an atmosphere of shared responsibility by decentralizing decision making and, in some cases, have required that individual schools form governance teams that include representation of the stakeholders. This shift in decision making is a dramatic change and will require clearly defined goals and expectations. In their review of recent literature on school decentralization, Wohlstetter & Odden (1992) found several interesting themes or problem areas about school-based management policy. "In particular, the literature suggests that school-based management (a) is everywhere and nowhere, (b) comes in a variety of forms, (c) is created without clear goals or real accountability, and (d) exists in a state/district policy context that often gives mixed signals to schools" (p. 530). In addition, the authors suggested more research is needed in this area. This study will contribute to the knowledge of school reform by examining the actions and behaviors of governance team members involved in a shared decision-making process in one school. Specifically, the results of this study will be beneficial to the school studied, the school district, and other educational organizations attempting to decentralize decision making.

The process of shared decision making requires that the principal manage and lead differently. The top-down model used for decision making in our schools is no longer working and it is time to make a paradigm shift. The role of the principal shifts from one individual making the decisions to one

participating in a process of collaboration with teachers and parents. Rost's definition of leadership requires moving from the notion of the individual doing leadership to one of a process of relationships. Schools that embrace shared decision making as a means to create change are attempting to do leadership differently. This study's examination of the leadership processes in this one school will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of ways schools can make significant changes. Rost (1991) pointed out that recent studies of leadership have indicated that there is a changing understanding of what this process means. This study will also focus on the leadership process that may or may not exist during the shared decision-making process at the school. This information will contribute to a better understanding of the practical implications of Rost's definition of leadership by examining the relationships that exist in both processes.

#### Definition of Terms

**Leadership:** Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1993).

**Paradigm:** "a paradigm is an entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175).

**Shared Decision Making:** "a restructuring process through which the culture, organization and procedures of a school district are changed so that learning and teaching are enhanced. The process includes involvement of all segments of the school district community, based on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and accountability" (Association of California School Administrators, 1990, p. 1).

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The literature review covers the last ten years and focuses on the four major themes of this research: a historical perspective of the restructuring movement, which is often referred to as the second wave of school reform, shared decision making, the changing roles of the principal and the staff, and the nature of leadership. The second wave of school reform emphasizes the need for school districts to decentralize decision making and to empower those closest to the classroom. The intent is to involve teachers and parents in decisions that could have an impact on student achievement. After an introductory section on the restructuring movement, I present some background information on the concept of decentralization, specifically the shared decision-making process. I also present information supporting the need for the principal and the school staff to work collaboratively. And finally, I will discuss some new ideas on the nature of leadership.

Some form of school improvement has been pursued for as long as our education systems have been in existence. However, the need for significant educational restructuring has been a concern in the United States for the last ten years. External pressure and demands have been and still are important motivators. The century's movement into a high-technology information

age demands a new kind of education and new forms of school organizations (Darling-Hammond, 1993). Improving the existing system will not suffice. With the movement towards technology and communication, the needs of the work force are changing. The skills students need today and in the future are quite different than even twenty years ago, and our educational system needs to prepare students for a changing job market. Due to this changing job market, the business community, in particular, has become vocal in its call for fundamental change in education. "Schools are not "closed systems" that can decide what they want to do and set their standards for success in isolation from their constituents" (Conley, 1992a, p. 3). The success or failure of the education system is felt by every aspect of society. Now is the time for the educational establishment to open its doors and invite the business community, teachers and parents to become more involved in the education process.

In addition to changing technology, society has changed ideologically and demographically but education has not always reflected the diversity of these changes. The needs of the individual children and families have changed dramatically over the last twenty years. "Increasingly the community is looking to local schools to meet all the needs of its children whatever their culture, creed, need or disability" (Newton & Tarrant, 1992, p. 215). These societal changes reinforce the need for schools to do things differently. More of the same will not suffice.

#### Historical Perspective

The early reforms were prescriptive in nature, attempting to revive the system by strengthening the educational standards and holding schools more accountable. Recently there has been a greater emphasis on processes to restructure and decentralize the organization, management, and governance

of schooling (Hallinger, Murphy, & Hansman, 1992). In an effort to better prepare students for the twenty-first century, there is a need for educational reform to move from merely improving the existing educational system to making significant changes in the system. "The world has changed radically. *More*, or even *better*, is not enough. In order to prepare young people for effective living in the modern world, today's successful schools are involving everyone who has a stake in education -- students, parents, teachers, community residents, taxpayers, all of us" (Lappe & Du Bois, 1994, p. 202). The stakeholders must have an active role in the governance process.

Under the traditional form of school governance the principal created the vision for the needed changes and directed the staff to implement them. Schools have become much too complex for one person, the principal, to have all the answers. Considering the changes that will need to occur in the classroom in order to truly make a difference in student achievement, teachers must be involved in the restructuring process. This will require principals to manage and lead differently.

During the last ten years the term *restructuring* has appeared often in the educational reform literature. School districts across the country are attempting to restructure their schools to enhance student achievement. Hallinger et al. (1992) defined restructuring as "endeavors to: (a) decentralize the organization, management, and governance of schooling; (b) empower those closest to students in the classroom; (c) create new roles and responsibilities for all the players in the system; and (d) transform the learning-teaching process that unfolds in the classroom" (p. 330). Decentralization, site-based management, and shared decision making are strategies within the restructuring reform movement.

It is important to make a distinction between the terms *decentralization*, *school-based management*, and *shared decision making*. Decentralization, in terms of education, refers to school districts giving more of the budget and hiring decision-making power to individual school sites as an essential step toward improving schools (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994). School-based management is a governance reform. Wohlstetter and Odden (1992) pointed out that school-based management "entails more than just decentralizing budget and personnel decisions and ought to be joined with content (curriculum and instruction) reforms so as to enhance its probability of improving educational practice" (p. 529). Shared decision making is a process for enabling school-based management to become a reality. Shared decision making implies that the principal will involve all segments of the school community in the school governance process in an attempt to enhance the teaching and learning process (ACSA, 1990). The assumption is that by empowering those closest to the classroom in the decision-making process, students will improve academically. "Increased teacher involvement in school decisions are effective tools for focusing the staff on student outcomes instead of peripheral concerns that devour time, energy, and money" (Bernd, 1992, p. 68). Involving the stakeholders in the decision-making process is significantly different from the traditional, top-down process of decision making. The primary difference between the two models is the impact that relationship has on the outcomes of the decision-making process. The relationships between the principal, teachers, and parents will be different and, consequently, each stakeholder's role will change.

Traditionally speaking, the need for the principal to develop empowering relationships with the staff was minimal. However, under the shared

decision-making form of school governance, one key factor in the success of the process is the principal's ability to engage in empowering relationships with the members of the staff (Kirby & Colbert, 1994; Reitzug, 1994). This is not an easy task and takes time and energy. In addition to being sensitive to the need for changing the roles of the stakeholders, it is important that all participants understand that schools are complex social organizations made up of human beings with different background assumptions and experiences. A collaborative working relationship between the principal, the staff, and the parents requires a safe and trusting environment. These changing roles and their impact on the shared decision-making process will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

#### The Shared Decision-Making Process

Shared decision making is more than a change in structure; it is a process that empowers stakeholders to get involved in decision making, specifically teachers and parents. Inviting teachers and parents to join in the decision-making process is the first step toward empowerment. However, empowerment is more than shifting power, it refers to reshaping the power relations in schoolwide decision making. Due to the isolation that characterizes the work setting at most schools, teachers have been somewhat empowered, but only in their classrooms. Shared decision making requires teachers to become involved in schoolwide decisions that may ultimately have an impact on the student achievement level in their classrooms. "True empowerment involves: 1) decision participation, 2) authority over issues concerning professional life -- both at classroom and school levels, and 3) opportunities to acquire knowledge necessary to warrant such authority" (Kirby, 1992, p. 331). By involving teachers and parents in the decision-making process the potential to improve student achievement increases.

Improved student achievement depends on teachers (Weiss, Chambone, & Wyeth, 1992). Shared decision-making strategies are a means to improve decisions about teaching and learning. However, some of the research indicates that the shared decision-making process often stops at the classroom door. Often times teachers are not involved in decisions that will truly affect the teaching and learning process (Bernd, 1992; Kirby, 1992; Streshly, 1992). School administrators form teacher committees which endeavor to work out solutions to problems such as who should have reserved parking spaces and how much paper each staff member can use. If schools are going to make the necessary changes for successful reform, administrators need to allow teachers access to the decision process in all significant facets of school governance (Kirby, 1992). When teachers share in decision making they become committed to the decisions that emerge. "They 'buy into' the decision; they feel a sense of ownership; therefore, they are more likely to see that decisions are actually implemented" (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992, p. 350). Participation advances a sense of professionalism.

Bernd (1992) pointed out that what is needed to affect student achievement is participatory management that does not avoid discussion of the real issues associated with teaching and learning. Teachers have important information to contribute to the decision-making process. Because teachers are closest to the students, they are in an optimum position for identifying the real issues that affect student achievement. Teacher participation in the process will help keep the focus of decisions on the needs of students. In addition to teacher involvement, parent involvement is essential in raising the achievement level of children.

Empowering parents to have some say in their children's education also is critical. Societal changes and the need for both parents to work have



contributed to the growing gap between home and school. There are many degrees of parental involvement. It is not enough to just have symbolic participation by parents. A recent study conducted at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, concluded that parental involvement in restructuring schools is helpful. In this study, Wehlage & Osthoff analyzed parental involvement in 24 elementary, middle, and high schools, and they found a variety in not only the amount of parental participation but also in the quality of participation. "In the schools in which parents were highly involved, we found three kinds of substantial parental participation and decision making: 1) organizational policy, 2) pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, and 3) technical support for school activities" (1995, p. 1). When parents are involved in these types of decisions, they develop an understanding of the educational system and are better able to guide their children. Parents are also a source of information for the school. There may be issues and concerns in the community that are having an adverse affect on the school. By strengthening the lines of communication among the home, community, and the school, the educational and social needs of children will be more adequately served.

Shared decision making provides lines of communication that enable teachers, parents, and administrators to work together to facilitate student achievement. In an effort to create an environment that promotes open, honest communication, it is necessary to participate face-to-face with other adults (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992). Leading a school through a shared decision-making process is very different from the traditional one-way, top-down attempts at communication with the principal making all the decisions. In traditional school settings, teachers spend very little time interacting with adults. Through shared decision making, teachers

collaborate with administrators, parents and other teachers, while principals are asked to share their authority. Decisions are made through open, honest dialogue among all the stakeholders in an atmosphere of collegiality.

There is widespread agreement that collegiality among teachers is an important ingredient for promoting better working conditions, improving teaching practice, and getting better results (Barth, 1990; Johnson, 1990; Lieberman & Miller, 1984). Moving from a hierarchical model of decision making to an inclusive model requires teachers to make a shift from classroom isolation to working with other teachers, administrators, and parents. Collegiality provides the conditions and arrangements for teachers and others to work together (Segiovanni, 1992). Johnson (1990) described just such a situation.

In the ideal world of schooling, teachers would be true colleagues working together, debating about goals and purposes, coordinating lessons, observing and critiquing each other's work, sharing successes and offering solace, with the triumphs of their collective efforts far exceeding the summed accomplishments of their solitary struggles. The real world of schools is usually depicted very differently, with teachers sequestered in classrooms, encountering peers only on entering or leaving the building. Engaged in parallel piecework, they devise curricula on their own, ignoring the plans and practices of their counterparts in other classrooms or grades; when it occurs, conversation offers a diversion from teaching rather than the occasion for its deliberation --travel plans rather than lesson plans are said to dominate faculty-room talk. Although such portrayals are often exaggerated, they contain more truth than most of us would like to believe. (p. 148)

When an atmosphere of collegiality exists, collaboration and consensus decision making are possible. Friend and Cook define interpersonal collaboration as: "style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (1993, p. 5). The common goal is student achievement. Collaboration is a process for creating the changes necessary to enhance student achievement. The process requires parents, teachers and administrators to come together to discuss and debate issues.

For all participants a shift from operating from an individual stance to one that is in relationship to others is necessary. This new face-to-face relationship requires time and training (Kirby, 1992; Weiss, Cambone & Wyeth, 1992; Wohlstetter & Mohrman, 1993). Shared decision making requires a commitment from the staff and a willingness to put the time in for training and development. Kruse et al. (1995) found that with appropriate staff development, schools were able to give up old patterns of interactions. Schools need to take the time to carefully study the advantages and disadvantages of such a process before they embark on establishing shared decision making. Reba found that schools that initially focused more on the process than on the product tended to stay together longer and eventually began to tackle more important school improvement issues.

School districts often attempt the latest reform efforts without providing the necessary training for their staffs. Weiss et al. (1992) stressed that those who undertake shared decision making need to recognize that training is foundational and fundamental. The teachers, as well as the principal, are being asked to do things that they have traditionally not had the opportunity to do before, and they need assistance to learn these new skills (Weiss et al., 1992). Wohlstetter & Odden (1992) stated that one of the factors that makes

shared decision making work is that teachers and administrators have a wide range of knowledge and skills. "These skills include planning and organizing a meeting, engaging in group process, developing content knowledge and instructional strategies skills, and analyzing data on school performance" (p. 537).

School districts across the country are attempting shared decision making as a strategy for school reform. There are many different models being used in an effort to implement shared decision. In Chicago, the school district turned over the control and accountability of the schools to the community by electing an 11-member council at each school that consists of six parents, two teachers, two community representatives, and the principal. A second example is the Los Angeles School District. The school leadership councils have between six and sixteen members and half of the council seats are reserved for teachers (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). In the San Diego Unified School District, the school governance teams are required to have one administrator and representation from the San Diego Teachers Association, the Classified Employees Association, the California School Employees Association, and parents. The majority is from the teaching staff.

The principal and staff at Valencia Park Elementary School, the focus of my study, have taken it a step further and implemented the nine components of James Comer's School Development Program.

In 1988, several staff members from Valencia Park went to hear James Comer speak at the San Diego City Schools Dropout Conference. "As I was sitting in the audience listening to James Comer," Barbara Beckstrand, compensatory education resource teacher said, "the excitement of our staff made it obvious that this is exactly what we needed at Valencia Park!" (Shipley, 1992, p. 19).

In the early 1970s, child psychiatrist James Comer and his colleagues at Yale Child Study Center experimented with an intervention program in two inner-city elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut. "Mr. Comer concluded that children's experiences at home and in school deeply affect their psycho social development, which in turn shapes their academic achievement" (Zimmermann, 1993, p. 1). The *intervention model* is intended to improve the educational experience of poor minority students. One of the major components of the program is to create a school climate that fosters a sense of community. "Comer's model is based on a simple principle: everyone with a stake in a school should have a say in how it's run. It calls for forming a school governance team made up of teachers, parents, the principal, psychologists, and even cafeteria workers" (Leslie, 1989, p. 50). The concept is very similar to the shared decision-making process promoted by the current wave of educational reform, and the governance team structure required for each school in the San Diego Unified School District. However, the school district requires each governance team to include parents, teachers, administrators, and union representation, and to write a governance document. And, the district provides very little training and structure for implementation of the decision-making process. Yet, the Comer School Development Program requires many hours of training and provides a framework from which to operate.

The Comer model is a systems approach to school management and consists of nine components. The three guiding principals are: (1) *no fault*, which discourages blaming; (2) consensus decision making; and (3) collaboration. The three mechanisms are: (1) The School Planning and Management Team (governance team), (2) The Parents' Program, and, (3) The Mental Health Team. The three operations are: (1) comprehensive school

plan, (2) staff development, and (3) assessment and modification. These nine components provide the school with a structure from which to operate and the strategies for creating a school climate that fosters collegiality and strives to close the gap between home and school.

The Comer model provides the structure and the strategies for a school to move from a hierarchical system of decision making to a collaborative system. The principal and teacher roles are significantly different under this new form of school governance. As the instructional leader, it is the principal's responsibility to initiate this new decision-making process and empower the school staff to be part of the process.

Once the principal is committed to the process teachers, parents, and other staff members must be brought into the decision-making process. However, if this collaborative process is to be effective, the principal must truly believe that teacher and parent participation is a necessary ingredient to creating the changes needed to enhance student achievement. Positioned closest to the classroom, teachers have the greatest opportunity to impact student achievement. "Real curriculum and instructional reform is best carried out by the teachers at each site with the leadership of principals skilled at encouraging creative efforts" (Streshly, 1992, p. 57). Teachers are empowered to bring their curriculum and instructional expertise out from isolation in the classroom to sharing it with the administration and parents. Parents are encouraged to become more involved in their children's education by participating in school governance. This new collaborative working relationship will require role changes for the principal, teachers, and parents.

#### Changing Role of the Principal

The key to effective shared decision making is the principal (Flanagin & Richardson, 1991; Kirby & Colbert, 1994; Mizell, 1994). By position and

authority alone, the principal has significant influence on the decision-making and leadership processes that may or may not exist at a school. Principals with a strong commitment to shared decision making and to school reform manage to institute changes (Weiss & Cambone, 1992). Moving from a top-down governing process to a shared process is a significant change and begins with personal conviction. The principal must embrace the need for reform and believe that by shifting the power downward toward the classroom it will improve student achievement. The principal must make a commitment to shared leadership and expand his/her role. By sharing the decision making, the culture of an organization will change. The culture of an organization must support and encourage all members to bring issues forward. Culture is a metaphor for capturing the nature of the organization as a network of shared meaning (Morgan, 1989). It is the responsibility of the principal to create an open and honest atmosphere that invites each member to participate in the decision-making process. In the postindustrial paradigm of leadership, the principal can be very influential in creating a culture that invites others to participate in the transforming process of leadership.

One of the demands for educational reform is based on the declining level of student performance on national and state standardized performance tests. "The principal is hired to manage and lead the school towards student achievement. Effective schools research has posited the principal as a key element in sustained school achievement" (Kirby & Colbert, 1994, p. 39). This is a tremendous responsibility for one person. As indicated earlier, schools have become much too complex for one person to do the job. In the postindustrial model of leadership, anyone in the organization can initiate the leadership process. A person's position does not restrict or guarantee a

person from assuming the role of leader. Participation in the policy-making process is each individual person's responsibility (Tong, 1986). However, school personnel tend to look to the principal for direction. Because of this position power, the principal has the opportunity to initiate the shared decision-making process and the responsibility for sustaining the process. Shared decision making requires empowering, and it will be effective if the principal truly believes in collaboration to share power.

Kirby & Colbert (1994) found that principal authenticity was positively related to teachers' perceptions of their own empowerment. Teachers will dedicate the time and energy necessary for shared decision making when they are asked to participate in decisions that can have an impact on student achievement and that their input is valued by the principal. Merely involving staff in a decision-making process is not empowering nor is it sharing decision making. Empowerment is different from involvement.

Several authors discussed the concept of empowerment in their analysis of the changing role of the principal and shared leadership. Kirby (1992) indicated a need to define faculty empowerment. Reitzug (1994) described the changing role of the principal as shifting from "prescribing substance to facilitating processes in which substance can be discovered" (p. 304). In a case study, Reitzug looked at three empowering behaviors of principals: support, facilitation, and possibility. The emphasis was on developing a relationship with teachers based on trust and honoring teachers' opinions. The ethical question for principals is how to fulfill their responsibilities for moving schools forward without imposing their way upon teachers (Reitzug, 1994). Kouzes and Posner (1987) referred to one aspect of empowerment as "enabling." A primary way principals can demonstrate their commitment to teacher leadership is by enabling teachers through professional development.



Chamley, McFarlane, Young, & Caprio (1992) described the changing role of principal as a process consultant. Acting as a process consultant, the principal is not an expert in a particular problem but becomes expert in methods of inquiry. "Process consultation attempts to ask the right questions and help individuals find the right answer" (p. 3). In a talk at the Middle School Principals Institute, Mizell described the "new principal." "The new principal does not exercise control through hierarchical authority" (1994, p. 3). The new principal asks questions and offers a variety of alternatives that expand the knowledge base of the staff rather than tells the staff how to accomplish a specific task. The principal's role is to create strategies for collegiality. "The optimal solution would support collegial, empowering processes aimed toward specific instructional goals" (Praeger, 1993, p. 3). The principal has the opportunity to create an atmosphere of trust that encourages and supports the involvement of all the stakeholders in a leadership process that will bring about needed change.

### Change through Leadership

Leadership as a process of engaging people in collaboration for needed change is very different from the traditional, hierarchical model of leadership. The study of leadership in the past focused primarily on the qualities of individuals, the great-man theory, and the excellence movement started by Peters & Waterman (1982). Rost pointed out this distinction very clearly and concisely with his industrial and postindustrial definitions of leadership. "Industrial leadership is great men and women with certain preferred traits influencing followers to do what the leaders wish in order to achieve group/organizational goals that reflect excellence defined as some kind of higher-level effectiveness" (1991, p. 180). Postindustrial leadership is: "an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real

changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (1993, p. 99). These two definitions of leadership are very different. As we approach the twenty-first century, many scholars have pointed out the need for our society to function differently.

Our society has become much too complex for us to rely on the industrial paradigm of leadership to make the necessary changes. We are confronted daily with the grim realities of poverty, violence, over population, and environmental decay. Globally speaking, there is enough evidence to support a need to function differently as a planet. Aburdene and Naisbet (1990) stated:

We stand at the dawn of a new era. Before us is the most important decade in the history of civilization, a period of stunning technological innovation, unprecedented economic opportunity, surprising political reform, and great cultural rebirth. It will be a decade like none that has come before because it will culminate in the millennium, the year 2000. (p. 11)

As we approach the twenty-first century it makes sense that many of the ways we operate globally, nationally, locally, and personally will undergo a shift as well. It is important to remember that change of this magnitude will not come easily or quickly and will require a "global mind change", a revolution in the way we think (Harman, 1988). Our society has become too complex for one person in an organization to know all that is required to be successful (Lappe & Dubois, 1994). The time is right for a new concept of leadership to emerge; one that will involve many in the process.

Locally speaking, today's problems -- homelessness, poverty, joblessness, drugs, crime, faltering health care system, racism and discrimination -- affect the education system and defy top-down answers. These problems are complex, interrelated and touch us all (DuBois & Lappe, 1994). Rost's

postindustrial model of leadership as a process of relationships, implies action; people doing something together for a purpose. The shift from one person doing leadership to the possibility of many people in the process doing leadership has powerful implications for changing schools and meeting the needs of today's children. Many schools are providing the opportunity for postindustrial leadership through the shared decision-making process. By empowering teachers and parents to be a part of school governance, school districts, specifically principals, are creating opportunities for collaboration among the stakeholders. "Leadership is about ordinary human beings forming relationships to change organizations, and societies according to their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1994c, p. 6). Forming relationships for the purpose of creating change is empowering and transforming.

Rost's notion of leadership as a process of influence relationships has powerful implications for empowering others to change and for transforming organizations such as schools. Leadership is always plural and relational, it always occurs within the context of others (Rost, 1991). Leaders and collaborators enter into an influence relationship with the intention of creating changes that reflect their mutual purposes. This notion of relationship is very personal and is a powerful tool for creating change. It is personal because the individuals in the relationship bring a sense of self and purpose to the collaborative process. This can have an empowering effect on others in the relationship. Gilligan (1982), Miller (1986), and Surrey (1984), have done research in the area of relationship, identity, intimacy, and mutual empathy. Their work has contributed significantly to the study of people in relationships with others and has implications for leadership. The emphasis is on being connected to others and creating an atmosphere that allows for open, honest communication.

Surrey discussed empowerment as a result of connected learning and mutual empathy. "Connected learning is taking the view of others and connecting this to one's own knowledge -- building a new and enlarged understanding of broader human experience" (1984, p. 5). Jordan defined empathy as "a cognitive and emotional activity in which one person is able to experience the feelings and thoughts of another person and simultaneously is able to know his/her own feelings and thoughts" (Miller, 1986, p. 2). The work of these scholars has contributed to a new understanding of leadership as a process evolving from self-knowledge to the self in relationship to others and expanding to a sense of community.

Miller (1986) spoke of healthy connections with others as "growth enhancing relationships" (p. 3). If the people participating in the relationship are open and honest, there will be a greater sense of connection and motivation for more connection. Miller (1986) also pointed out that this kind of relationship is not possible in power-over relationships or between unequals. This has implications for the political nature of leadership. In Rost's postindustrial model of leadership the power resources people can use to influence must be non coercive (1991). The following are a few of the ways Rost suggested using power resources to influence: (1) focus on the power of purpose, (2) cooperate with other collaborators to achieve consensus, (3) act courageously and unselfishly, and (4) be actively involved rather than just present. DuBois and Lappe (1994) stressed that power exists in relationships and that the process of building relationships becomes a source of power. The energy derived from the working relationships is the power that can create change.

Shared decision making creates an opportunity for administrators, teachers and parents to form relationships that can create change that will have an

impact on meeting the needs of children. As mentioned earlier collaboration for the purpose of creating change is empowering and transforming. Burns (1978) described leadership as transformational, "the function of leadership is to engage followers, not merely activate them, to commingle needs and goals in a common enterprise" (p. 461). Through shared decision making, principals give up some of their control and give teachers and parents some decision-making power. When stakeholders collectively identify mutual goals and work together toward the achievement of those goals, change can be realized. Astin & Leland emphasized the empowering nature of leadership in their definition: "leadership is a process by which members of a group are empowered to work together synergistically toward a common goal or vision, that will create change and transform institutions, and thus improve the quality of life" (1991, p. 8). Foster (1989) pointed out that "certain agents can engage in transformative practices which change social structures and forms of community, and it is this we label leadership" (p. 49). This process of creating powerful relationships sounds very much like the process of shared decision making. In both processes, people enter into relationship with others with the intention of creating changes that reflect their mutual purposes.

In order for members of an organization to feel empowered to participate in the leadership process, there must be structures in place that provide avenues for communication. When there are no policies and procedures in place for communication, members of the organization have nowhere to go with their concerns; their energies are stifled, and the process stops. Senge's (1990) learning systems' approach stresses the need for organizations to establish systems of interconnectedness. In order for shared decision making to be effective, a structure must be in place for communication between the

administration, teachers, other staff members, and parents. Many schools have set up committee or team structures that provide a forum for parents and staff members to discuss and debate issues and concerns that may have an impact on the educational process of children. At Valencia Park Elementary School there are several teams that are interconnected, providing the system for communication between and among the administrators, staff members, and parents. There are grade level teams that provide teachers an opportunity to discuss and debate an issue or concern. There are elected representatives from each of the grade level teams that are members of the School Planning and Management Team. In addition to grade level representation, the SPMT consists of representation from the administration, classified personnel, and parents. There is also a school site council that consists of representatives from each of the stakeholder groups. The structure provides the opportunity for multidirectional communication that will enable influence relationships to be established among the stakeholders. By expanding the self in relation to others, a sense of community can be generated.

It is natural for human beings to seek connections with other human beings. Foster stated: "It is an enduring feature of human life to search for community, to attempt to establish patterns of living based on mutual need and affection, development and protection" (Foster, 1989, p. 48). As relationships grow and strengthen, a sense of community becomes part of the culture. By implementing a process of shared decision making, schools tap into the power of creating change by expanding relationships and establishing a common agenda. One of Rost's four essential elements of leadership is "that the intended changes reflect the mutual purposes of both the collaborators and the leaders" (1994c, p. 4). By identifying mutual goals,

leaders and collaborators can create an atmosphere of shared meaning. In his book, *Building Community in Schools*, Sergiovanni (1994) emphasized the need for "the principal and the teachers to develop together a set of values about the relationships they want to share; the ties they want to create so that together they can become a community of learners and leaders, a community of colleagues" (p. 193). Creating a sense of community through the expansion of relationships has powerful implications for empowering others to change and could transform an organization.

#### The Intended Outcome Is Change

Leadership and shared decision making are about change. Shared decision making is a tool principals and school personnel can utilize to formulate and implement needed change. It is a process that brings people together for the purpose of collaboration. "Systems do not change themselves, people change them" (Fullan, 1993, p. 7). Shared decision making also provides the opportunity for leadership to occur.

In the new paradigm, leadership is about leaders and collaborators working together to decide on changes they want to institute in groups, organizations, and societies. Leadership is about collaborators and leaders influencing one another to agree mutually upon changes that they want for their groups, organizations, and societies. (Rost, 1994, p. 6)

The postindustrial paradigm of leadership will require collaborators and leaders to have a strong sense of self and purpose. In order to build influencing relationships, leaders and collaborators will be part of open and honest communication. In his book, *Change Forces*, Fullan (1993) asked the question: "How can a person be a part of open, honest communication without a personal vision?" (p. 13). It's not likely, he suggested, because personal purpose and vision are the starting agenda for change. One of the

first things the staff at Valencia Park Elementary School did to begin the change process was to post affirmations in classrooms and hallways and to read them to students daily. "Personal change is the most powerful route to system change" (Fullan, 1993, p. 140). Personal change requires a willingness to problem solve and an eagerness to learn. The next step towards organizational change is for personal change to evolve to a connectedness with others.

People need one another to learn and accomplish things. "Growth, change, and ultimately evolution occurs as individuals, organizations, and society increase the depth of their relationships by continually broadening and strengthening their interdependent connections" (Land & Jarman, 1992, p. 189). People are the organizations; without people there are no schools, corporations and so on. In order to keep pace with this rapidly changing world, we need to find ways of strengthening our connections to one another. One way is through collaboration and discovering the shared meaning that may exist within the organization. The shared meaning may provide the stakeholders the energy and creativity to generate the needed changes. Fullan (1993) pointed out:

Systems change when enough kindred spirits coalesce in the same change direction. This is why top-down structural change does not work. You can't mandate what matters because there are no shortcuts to changes in systems' cultures. But like-minded people, pushing for change do add up. (p. 143)

In order to make the shift from a top-down structure to a collaborative process for change, it will be necessary to develop a new mindset. Senge (1990) pointed out "that the Greek word metanoia means a fundamental shift of mind" (p. 13). This is true for the way we perceive educational reform. We



need a fundamental shift of the mind. It is not enough to merely reform education as that has been tried. We need a revolution. We need to make a personal commitment to be open and actively pursue whatever changes are necessary to turn schools into learning organizations that prepare the future generation for the twenty-first century.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Methodological Overview

"The depth and detail of qualitative data can be obtained only by getting close, physically and psychologically to the phenomenon under study" (Patton, 1980, p. 43). I used a qualitative case study approach to observe and gather information on the shared decision-making and leadership processes at Valencia Park Elementary School. "Case study research is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting observations of educational phenomena" (Merriam, 1988, p. 2). My intention was to focus on the changes that occurred as a result of the relationships that were created on the school governance team. However, what I discovered was that the changes were also a result of relationships that existed throughout the school. The process of shared decision making cannot be isolated to just one aspect of school governance. Because qualitative design is emergent, I discovered that shared decision making at Valencia Park is a systemic process involving groups of people collaborating throughout the school. The groups are interconnected through a network of committees and teams. At Valencia Park Elementary School, the school governance team is referred to as the School Planning and Management Team and is one component of the shared decision-making process. Merriam stated that a case study is an "examination of a specific

phenomenon such as an institution" (1988, p. 9). What emerged during the data gathering phase of this study was the need to examine the case holistically. As the study evolved, I discovered that the changes that took place were a result of what was happening throughout the school and not just on the School Planning and Management Team.

The case study approach was appropriate because it allowed for insight, discovery, and interpretation through a variety of methods. Yin defined a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (1984, p. 23). The sources of evidence I used were interviews, observations and documentation.

In this study I attempted to understand the changes that took place and the influence relationships that existed at Valencia Park Elementary School between 1985 and 1995. Stake pointed out that one of the major differences between quantitative and qualitative research is "the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry" (1995, p. 37). Qualitative researchers seek for understanding the complex interrelationships that exist rather than for explanation and control. The school made a shift from one person, the principal, governing the school, to a network of relationships governing the school. Case study methodology enabled me, as the researcher, to develop an understanding of the changes and the behaviors that occurred as the school made the shift from a top-down form of governing to a more inclusive form of governing.

In qualitative methodology the instrument is the researcher, who is responsible for gathering and analyzing the data. Merriam (1988) believed that the investigator is "the single most important component in qualitative

research" (p. 122). By exploring the nature of the shared decision-making and leadership processes, I gained an understanding of the influence relationships that existed as this school experienced change. To gain an understanding of human relationships, it is necessary to become personally involved in the process of inquiry. Stake (1995) pointed out a second distinction between quantitative and qualitative research: "the distinction between a personal and impersonal role for the researcher" (p. 37). During the course of my investigation, I made at least twenty-five visits to Valencia Park Elementary School ranging from one hour to six hours. This provided me the opportunity to develop personal relationships with several members of the staff and facilitated an in-depth study.

#### Site Selection

In the initial phase of the selection process, there were two factors I considered. First, I wanted to look at a racially diverse and economically impacted school that had experienced significant positive changes over the course of the last five to ten years. In addition, I wanted the school's principal to be fairly new to the school. I asked several people at the district level to give me the names of schools that fit those criteria. Five schools were consistently mentioned. I contacted the district office and obtained the performance indicators on each school. After carefully reviewing the profiles of each school, I selected Valencia Park Elementary School.

I chose Valencia Park for several reasons. The first reason I selected this school was its location and diverse population. Valencia Park Elementary School is located in East San Diego and is part of the San Diego Unified School District. During the 1994-95 school year the ethnic composition of the 746 students was approximately 47 percent African-American, 19 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Filipino, 11 percent Indochinese and 11 percent White.

In terms of the economic status of the student population, 73 percent are eligible for a free or reduced lunch. In terms of student achievement, during the early and mid 1980s students were not meeting district expectations. Closing the achievement gap between white and nonwhite students, specifically African-American and Mexican-American students, is a major concern of the San Diego Unified School District.

A second reason I selected Valencia Park Elementary School was that the school district indicators for this school showed recent improvement: test scores were on the rise, student attendance had improved, and the student mobility rate had declined. Beginning with 1992, student scores on the Abbreviated Stanford Achievement Test showed a general improvement trend. The reading comprehension scores went up in grades two, three, and four, while at grades one and five they went down slightly in 1993, and back up in 1994. The language expression scores went up in grades one, two, and five, while in grade three they dropped significantly in 1993, and in grade four the grades went up significantly in 1993, and dropped slightly in 1994. Math application scores went up in grades one, two, and four, while at grades three and five the scores went down. Overall, there had been gains in student achievement.

Valencia Park also had shown positive changes in school attendance and increased stability. There had been a slight decrease in the number of schoolwide absences and a significant drop in the nonapportioned absence rate. The nonapportioned absence rate is the percentage of students absent for reasons other than illness, a doctor appointment, or bereavement. School districts receive funds from the state based on the average daily attendance of the student population. The school district does not receive money for nonapportioned absences. From 1989 to 1994, the percentage of

nonapportioned absences dropped from 18 percent to 4 percent. Also, the transiency rate had changed considerably. The mobility index had dropped from 78 in 1989 to 56 in 1994.

A third reason for selecting this school was to examine the shared decision-making process that was in place and its effect on the above mentioned changes. I believe that shared governance can have a positive influence on student achievement in inner-city schools. However, this merits further study in order to determine the relationship of improved student achievement and shared decision making. Since there may be a certain amount of lag time needed to see such changes, these studies need to be conducted over time. I also believe that by sharing school governance, the principal can create an environment that will foster influence relationships between leaders and collaborators.

#### Data Gathering Methods

A case study research design is descriptive in nature and uses a variety of methods to describe and explain a specific phenomenon. The opportunity to use multiple methods of data collection is a major strength of case study research. In this case study, I conducted formal and informal interviews, conducted field observations, and examined district and school documents to gather and analyze data. I analyzed the shared decision-making and leadership processes to learn how they affected the changes that took place between 1985 and 1995 at Valencia Park Elementary School. This analysis provided "detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors" (Merriam, 1988, p. 67). By using these qualitative methodologies, I had the opportunity to get close physically to the people as the case study, gaining a better understanding of the changes that occurred at

Valencia Park Elementary School. "Qualitative study capitalizes on ordinary ways of getting acquainted with things" (Stake, 1995, p. 49).

#### The Interview Process

"Two principle uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others" (Stake, 1995, p. 64). Interviewing allows the researcher to gain information that can not be observed, such as feelings or how people interpret the situation around them. The case was not described or interpreted the same way by everyone. Each person interviewed had a different perspective on the case. It is the responsibility of the researcher to discover and present the multiple views of the case. "The interview is the main road to multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p. 64). The researcher examines these multiple realities, looking for similarities or patterns. The respondents may describe the case differently but they may mean the same thing. The respondent may also interpret the causes for the changes differently. The interview skills of the researcher has a significant impact on the final analysis of the case. The researcher must be a good listener and be prepared to ask clarifying questions when the opportunity arises.

On a continuum, the interview process can be very structured or very open-ended. My interview format was semi-structured. Even though my interviews were guided by a set of five questions, I allowed the conversation to flow naturally and did not concern myself with getting through all five questions. "This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging world view of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1988, p. 74). The success of the interview depends on the interaction between the researcher and the respondent. In addition to the structure of the interview, the knowledge and experience that the researcher brings to the interview can have an influence on the success of the study.

During the last six years, I have been the chairperson, a voting member, or an active participant on two governance teams, either as an administrator or as a teacher. Because of my experience I do have thoughts and ideas regarding what surfaced during this investigation. As the primary instrument, it is important that I be open and sensitive as to how my personal biases could influence the research.

My intention during the interviews was to gain an understanding of how each member of the School Planning and Management Team and others felt about the decision-making process at Valencia Park. The primary participants for this case study were the members of the School Planning and Management Team. The team consisted of the principal, the vice principal, two parents, seven teachers, one support staff, one classified staff, one Classified Employee Association representative, one Parent Teacher Association representative, and one School Site Council representative. The responsibility of the School Planning and Management Team is to make the decisions that govern the operation of the school. By interviewing the team members, I noted their perceptions of the positive changes had taken place at Valencia Park. In order to gain an historical perspective on the changes, I interviewed people who were not members of the School Planning and Management Team during the time I conducted my research. I also interviewed two previous principals. I determined the need for expanding my interview base as the study proceeded.

I conducted seventeen formal interviews and six follow-up interviews between July and November of 1995. I interviewed the principal twice. The first interview took place in early August and the second interview took place in late November. During my visits to the school, there were times I would have brief conversations with parents, teachers, and support staff. On two



occasions I spent approximately thirty minutes with the Community Service Officer. His primary responsibility is school safety.

The formal interviews were thirty to forty minutes in length. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I gave the participant a copy of the interview and asked him/her to delete, change, or add to the interview to ensure its accuracy. The focus of these interviews were on the individual's experience of being a part of the decision-making process and her/his perceptions of how that process may have influenced the changes that took place at Valencia Park between 1988 and 1995. I began each interview by asking the participants to outline their involvement with the school and the School Planning and Management Team. The interviewee was then asked to discuss the role of the School Planning and Management Team in terms of making decisions for the school. I was interested in knowing what decisions or issues were discussed, who controlled the agenda, and to what extent teachers, parents, and others were involved in the decision-making process. I was interested in knowing if decisions had been made during the years between 1988 and 1995 that had an influence on the improved test scores. As the interviews progressed, the participants were asked who the influential people were on the decision-making team. I anticipated that the participants would name the principal as one of the influential people. In the course of the interview, if the informant did not mention the principal I asked her/him specifically to discuss what influence the principal had in the decision-making process. As the story unfolded, I asked the participant to describe the behaviors these influential individuals used to bring about the changes. I was interested in knowing what the participant thought about these individuals and how their behaviors affected the relationships that existed on the School Planning and Management Team. The last area of

interest was the participant's opinion as to whether he/she considers the principal as a top-down decision maker or one that shares decision making.

The interviews took place when it was convenient for the participants. I told each participant that he/she would not be identified by name during this research project or in any subsequent use of the research except for the principal and vice principal. I had each sign a consent form that outlined the way the information would be used (see Appendixes A and B).

After each interview was transcribed, I read through it making notes and comments in the margins. During this initial process of analysis, I realized it would be necessary to conduct follow-up interviews with several of the participants. These subsequent interviews took place during my visits to Valencia Park.

One of the purposes of the interviews was to gain information about the decision-making process that existed on the School Planning and Management Team. Early in my investigation I discovered that the decision-making process extends throughout the school, beyond the School Planning and Management Team. This information provided insight into the relationship between shared decision making and the changes that took place at Valencia Park Elementary School. A second purpose of the interview process was to examine the leadership process. Through exploring the school's shared decision-making process, I gained an understanding of the leadership relationships that existed in the school.

In a case study approach, it is often necessary to revise interview questions as they arise. I was aware of this possibility and was open to making changes in the process. In addition, as I became more experienced with the interview process, I felt more relaxed and allowed the conversation to flow more naturally. A participant would often get excited about a topic and talk at

length. Rather than worrying about getting through all the questions, I allowed the participant to guide the conversation.

#### Field Observations

Between February and December of 1995 I visited Valencia Park Elementary School twenty-five times. I attended six School Planning and Management Team meetings, one grade level team meeting, one staff meeting, and, spent two full days as an observer. I conducted all but two of my seventeen formal interviews at Valencia Park. Each time I was on the campus I made a conscious effort to be aware of the setting.

Field observations make it possible to record the behavior as it is happening (Merriam, 1988). I was particularly interested in observing the behaviors of the members of the School Planning and Management Team during their meetings. I observed the behaviors and interactions of the participants while decisions were actually being formulated. Through frequent site visitations, I did build a rapport with the staff that enabled me to observe activities as unobtrusively as possible. Because this study focused primarily on the relationships that existed during the decision-making process, I spent much of my time formally observing governance team meetings. However, I spent time in the faculty room, parent center, and walking around the school grounds. These activities enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of the way people in the school perceive their role in the decision-making process. Also, the more time I spent formally and informally observing the school, the more my understanding of how leadership is practiced at Valencia Park became enhanced. After each visit to the school I made notes on my observations and conversations. The casual conversations with people often provided new information. The observation

process also validated some of the information I gained through the interview process.

Written documentation on Valencia Park Elementary School was available both at the district and site levels. These documents included performance indicators in a variety of areas, parent newsletters, the staff handbook, the school's governance document, the minutes from the Planning and Management Team meetings, and district memos to the school.

By examining these documents, I developed a more holistic understanding of how decisions were made at Valencia Park and the leadership relationships that existed at the school. The documents were a valuable tool in gaining a historical perspective on the changes that occurred, specifically in the area of student achievement and school climate.

#### Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data (Merriam, 1988). The process of analysis begins with the first interview, first observation or first document explored. "Data analysis and data collection are a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (Merriam, 1988, p. 119). In reality, I began the process of analysis while writing the research proposal. I read district and school documents and had informal interviews with the principal and one other staff member. After each formal interview, I read through the information several times making notes, comments, and observations in the margins. "At this stage the researcher is virtually holding a conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making comments" (Merriam, 1988, p. 131). The results of early and continuous analysis enabled me to reframe my interview questions, refocus my field observations, and expand the examination of documents. Through this process I had already begun identifying distinct themes and patterns of ideas and beliefs. Once all

the data had been collected, the analysis became even more extensive. Throughout the analysis process, I was looking for patterns and themes that would develop my understanding of the decision-making and leadership processes that existed at the school.

One of the primary functions of the analysis process is to organize the data into a meaningful system that would be easy to access. "Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one's data. In the process of analysis, data are consolidated, reduced and to some extent, interpreted" (Merriam, 1988, p. 127). After developing a system for classifying the information, I examined the data looking for emerging "regularities, things that happen frequently with groups of people" (Merriam, 1988, p. 131). The first step was to decide whether to organize the data topically or chronologically. Based on the purpose of my study, I decided to arrange the data topically. Because the analysis phase had been an ongoing process, I already had some idea of the recurring themes and patterns. At this point in the analysis the four themes that were continuously emerging were: (1) the need for structure and communication, (2) the changes that took place between 1985 and 1995, (3) the importance of relationship, and, (4) the role of the principal.

As I read through the data I color coded the four themes. During this process, I found that some of the data fell under more than one theme. I coded that information with more than one piece of colored paper. Because of this discovery, I found that I had to have several sets of the data.

The next step was to organize the information by themes. I did this by sorting the data by color. I used additional sets of data as needed. I then read through each of the four sets of data looking for subthemes. I coded the subthemes within each main theme with different colors. At this point in the analysis process, I had dissected the information and sorted it into

manageable, easy to access, categories of information. Stake (1995) referred to this process as the search for meaning and consistency. Important meaning can come from its reappearance over and over again.

The next step was to read over each category or theme of information several times in an attempt to discover what information could be linked together. According to Guba & Lincoln (1981), devising categories involves both convergent and divergent thinking. Convergent thinking requires the researcher to determine what fits together, and divergent thinking required me to determine what makes the categories different. I gradually linked these categories together, compressing the data into a narrative form that will make sense to the reader. What makes this a viable case study is my striving to discover the meaning of the raw data and present it in a concise and coherent report.

The purpose of the analysis is to understand the complexities of a bounded system by combining the data from the multiple methods of collection. I used the process of triangulation as a way of testing my interpretation of the data. Triangulation is "one technique of trying to arrive at the same meaning by at least three independent approaches" (Jaeger, 1988, p. 263). Thus, I used the field notes and the school and district documents to validate the interview data.

The result of this study is a holistic description and analysis of what happened at Valencia Park Elementary School to create the changes in the areas of student achievement, teacher turnover, school climate, and parent involvement. Specifically, the description focuses on the nature of the shared decision-making and leadership processes and how they may have contributed to the changes. This report provides the school staff, interested district personnel, and others with an understanding of the shared decision-

making and leadership processes at Valenica Park Elementary School and what influence these processes may have had on the positive changes that occurred.

#### Ethical Considerations

The principal gave written permission to conduct the study at Valencia Park Elementary School. All participants in the study signed a consent form. They understood that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to discontinue participation in the research at any time without consequences. They had the option of remaining anonymous if any quotes were used in any part of the study. All interview and field observation information were kept confidential. I filed the required documents to the Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects, and my research was approved before I began my research (see Appendix C).

#### Limitations

Because this research is a single case study, its direct applicability to other schools is limited in terms of how relationships and behaviors of staff members may have influenced the change processes. At a different school with different people, the relationship outcomes of collaboration might be very different.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF VALENCIA PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

#### Introduction

The chapter focuses on the changes that took place at Valencia Park Elementary School between 1985 and 1995, and the factors that may have had an influence on the those changes. One of the criteria I used in selecting Valencia Park Elementary School was the positive changes in test scores, attendance, suspensions, and the transiency rate of the students. Beginning with 1992, student scores on the Abbreviated Stanford Achievement Test showed a general improvement. From 1989 to 1994 the percentage of nonapportioned absences dropped from 18 percent to 4 percent. The number of student suspensions dropped significantly and the mobility index had dropped from 78 in 1989 to 56 in 1994. In addition to these changes, I discovered dramatic changes in teacher turnover, school climate, and parent involvement. Three factors that had an influence on these changes and that consistently came up in the study were: (1) the shared decision-making process, (2) the activities of the principal, and (3) the relationships that existed between the school staff and the parents.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of my investigation of Valencia Park Elementary School. I used observations, interviews, and the



review of school and district documentation to uncover the changes and the reasons for the changes.

This chapter tells the story of how the transformation of Valencia Park evolved. I present an overview of what happened at the school between 1985 and 1995. This is followed by an elaboration of the story that focused on the three factors that had the greatest influence on the change: (1) the structure and philosophy of the Comer program, (2) the activities of the principal, and (3) the network of influence relationships. In conclusion I comment on the changes in teacher turnover, school climate, and parent involvement that were the result of the efforts of the principal, teachers, support staff, and parents of Valencia Park Elementary School.

#### The Story

The staff and parents of Valencia Park Elementary School transformed the school from a top-down, decision-making organization to a shared decision-making organization. The shared decision-making and leadership processes that existed in 1995 were the result of a change process that evolved during the years between 1985 and 1995. The major components of the evolution were: (1) the recognition and desire by the staff and parents for a need to change, (2) a change in administration in 1985, (3) the willingness of the administration and a team of teachers to become a *Comer School*, (4) the structure and philosophy of the Comer program, (5) the activities of the principal, and (6) the network of influence relationships. The result of the process was the creation of a strong sense of family. This collective sense of responsibility provided the opportunities for leadership.

The process started with the realization that there was a need for educational reform at Valencia Park. During the 1980s student test scores were low, the school climate was described by several staff members as

"negative and unfriendly," and parents did not feel welcomed. A former Valencia Park administrator described the school as:

One of the toughest schools in the district, I mean it had every challenge possible. I think we had a turnover of 15, 16, 17 teachers annually, high suspension rate, high discipline referral rate, low test scores.

According to one staff member, who had worked at Valencia Park for 17 years and had children that had attended the school, stated:

By the mid 1980s a lot of the parents in this community got together and went to the district and we said: "Hey, we're tired! You can shut the school down because our kids aren't getting anything out of it. Shut it down and turn it into a rec center, they'll get more out of a rec center than they are getting from the school!"

The parents were frustrated with the lack of consistency in the school's programs, teachers, and principals.

In 1985 Carolyn Dubuque became principal of Valencia Park Elementary School and two years later Richard Cansdale served as vice principal. Prior to 1985, the principals of Valencia Park were described by several of the participants as traditional, top-down administrators. "He was a very authoritative decision-maker. He just had a couple of people in his confidence and they just ran the school, and none of us really knew what was going on." Dubuque was different. Her door was opened, she was visible, and she encouraged others to participate in the process of finding new ways to better meet the needs of the students.

Dubuque was principal from 1985 to January of 1989. During those years she looked for ways to improve the school's reputation, to raise the achievement level of the students, and to stabilize the teaching staff. She was

very concerned about the number of teachers that left each year. "One reason the students did not score well was that every year we would lose 14 or 15 teachers and every year we would get brand new teachers who were terribly enthusiastic, but they were not very well trained." In 1986 she developed the school's performing arts magnet which included academics, drama, and dance. This provided the school with a new focus, something to be proud of, and gave the students the opportunity to explore the areas of drama and dance.

In 1988 Dubuque, Cansdale and one third of the teaching staff heard James Comer speak at the San Diego City Schools Dropout Conference. He spoke of the changes his program had made in inner city schools in Connecticut. He told the story of how the program originally began in two urban elementary schools serving low-income African-American students in New Haven. "After seven years, behavior problems and absenteeism of students had dramatically declined, school climate had improved, and achievement levels were slowly growing" ("Breaking the cycle," 1995, p. 1). One teacher commented: "As I was sitting in the audience listening to James Comer, the excitement of our staff made it obvious to me that this is exactly what we needed at Valencia Park" (Shipley, 1992, p. 19). The team was inspired and the seed for change was planted.

One of the primary components of the Comer program was parent involvement. Dr. Comer (1995) believed that the relationship between the school and the family was at the heart of a child's success or lack of it, and was the catalyst that could help turn a school around. Dubuque realized that parent involvement was one area in which Valencia Park needed to improve.

I really felt that many of our children, if they had the support from the

home, would do better in school, and the Comer model is so good for that. You have an outreach teacher and you have your team that meets and goes in depth with the child's problems. It just seemed like a program that should work.

In addition to the parent component, the Comer program requires that the parents and the school staff would become participants in the school's decision-making process. It is a comprehensive management program for schools looking for ways to restructure their schools by involving the stakeholders. Cansdale commented:

Valencia Park had a high African-American population and so we felt if it [the Comer program] were successful in New Haven that it would be successful with Valencia Park. And because the Comer model not only embraced what our mission statement was, but it really gave us a systemic model to take the next step and put it together to restructure Valencia Park.

Comer had not brought his program to the west coast but Dubuque approached the Comer School Development Center at Yale University hoping that the administrators there would be interested in expanding to the west coast. They were not real eager at first, primarily because they did not want to roll out their model by school, they wanted it to have the support and commitment from the district. Dubuque contacted Dr. Beverly Foster, the area superintendent, and told her "we would really like to pilot a project using the James Comer model." The district then contacted Yale University and worked out the details for Valencia Park to pilot the program. "This marked the beginning of a lengthy negotiation process with Dr. Comer and Yale University that resulted in 12 San Diego schools officially recognized as Comer schools as of 1995" ("Breaking the cycle," 1995, p. 3).

In January of 1989 Dubuque left Valencia Park and Cansdale became acting principal until July of 1990. He continued the work of Dubuque, involving the stakeholders more and more in the decision-making process by forming committees and providing special training for the staff. Making the shift from a top-down form of decision making to a shared form of decision making required lots of on going training. Cansdale stated:

It wasn't a model you just would say, "This looks like something we want, let's do it." Before that could happen there would be training at Yale University and training at Valencia Park. We invited parents in because, of course, the parent component is very strong, we trained parents and paraprofessionals and teachers in the model.

A team of teachers and parents were sent to Yale for training, and soon after two people were sent out from Yale to begin training the staff and parents in the Comer model. Consistent and continuous training was a critical factor in the success of the Comer program. There were always new parents and teachers that would need to be trained in the components of the model.

Change is slow. In spite of the efforts of many for a year and a half, during the 1989-90 school year there were 90 suspensions, 33 kindergarten retentions, and 18-20 staff members left the school for positions elsewhere. However, the process of transforming Valencia Park had begun. It would take time for their efforts to have an effect on student achievement.

In July of 1990 Diana Shipley became principal. Her experience with the Comer School Development Program was limited to having worked in a school early in her career that had a very active parent program similar to the Comer model. In September of 1990 Shipley, the school counselor, and the newly hired community liaison went to Yale University for three days of

training. Each fall and spring for the following two years a team of five parents and teachers were sent to Yale for training in the Comer model.

Shipley continued the work of Dubuque and Cansdale in changing the beliefs and attitudes of the staff and parents. She let the staff and parents know from the very beginning that she was committed to the Comer Development Program, and expected them to participate in a decision-making process designed to ensure success for all Valencia Park's students. She realized the staff was in need of some interpersonal relations work. During one of our conversations she commented:

I had a very good psychologist working with me. We had meetings with parents and we had meetings with grade levels [teacher teams]. We talked about the relationships between parents and teachers, relationships between teachers and teachers, and relationships between teachers and administrators.

In 1990 the district required each school to form a governance team with representation from each stakeholder group, and to begin a process of shared decision making. The Comer model provided the structure and philosophy for putting together the governance team and for collaborative decision making. In the beginning the staff was apprehensive and nervous about shared decision making. One teacher reflected on the range of emotions that existed among the teachers: "it went from 'we're scared to death' to 'what's she talking about? You're the principal, do your job!'" In addition to the psychologist, Byron King, a race human relations facilitator worked with the staff on collaboration, shared decision making, speaking up, and taking your turn. One staff member stated:

Just working on little things like that while at the same time working on making changes in school programs was very helpful. Had we not had

Byron King or others to come in and help us, I don't know where we would have been or how we would have done it!

During her first year as principal (1990-91), Shipley and the staff implemented a schoolwide assertive discipline plan. With the help of an outside consultant, the staff designed a discipline program that included both rewards and consequences for inappropriate behavior. This made a considerable difference in classroom management and student suspensions. Student suspensions dropped from 90 in 1989 to 45 in 1992 to zero in 1995.

In addition to its affect on student behavior, the schoolwide assertive discipline plan also pulled the teachers together. Teachers started taking responsibility for all the students at Valencia Park and not just the thirty that were in their classrooms. These two factors had a very positive impact on an already improving school climate. Dubuque had started working on the school climate by improving the appearance of the physical plant. She had murals painted on the school and put up display cases for depicting the children's work. With the improved student behavior and the increasing staff cohesiveness, Valencia Park was becoming a warm and friendly place.

Due to the improved school climate and the hard work of the community liaison, parent involvement increased significantly between 1990 and 1995. During the 1994-95 school year parents volunteered 7,000 hours! Several factors contributed to this accomplishment: (1) Shipley's commitment to parent participation in the decision-making process, (2) immediately after being hired in 1990, the community liaison went out into the neighborhood and encouraged parents to become active in their children's school, (3) changing attitudes of staff towards parent participation, and (4) a series of classes offered to parents. In 1992 a program was set up after school to offer assistance to parents needing help in math and reading. In 1994 a computer

class was set up for parents. There was an on-going effort by the school to give something back to the parents for all their volunteer hours.

By 1993 the school climate had changed significantly, parents were feeling more welcomed at the school, and both the teachers and parents were feeling more comfortable participating in the decision-making process. Three of the decision-making committees that involved both parents and teachers were: (1) the School Planning and Management Team, (2) the School Site Council, and (3) the Student Support Team. Between 1990 and 1995 the committees reached consensus on decisions ranging from eliminating the seminar program in 1991 to a budget issue in 1995 that resulted in letting go 16 aides. It took lots of time, training, and Shipley's encouragement and support for the staff and parents to feel comfortable making these types of decisions. During an interview Shipley commented:

At first it was difficult. The first two years the body [SPMT] was uncomfortable with making decisions. So once it was articulated to them that this was their purpose, we're not here to socialize, we're here to do decision making, you know they felt better about it and the staff started receiving it in that light. But it took a lot of communication.

After Shipley's first year as principal the teaching staff started to stabilize. Except for the loss of personnel due to two reconfigurations of the school in 1991 and 1993, very few teachers chose to leave Valencia Park. In 1991 the school changed from a multitrack year round school to a single track year round school. And then in 1994 the school's enrollment dropped by 300 students due to the opening of a new elementary school in the neighborhood. By the 1993-94 school year teachers were choosing to stay at Valencia Park. The school had changed, attitudes and behaviors had changed, and there was



a growing feeling of cohesiveness among the staff. One teacher's comments expressed the views of many.

I think we lost two teachers last year [1994-95] and that's because they actually moved out of the area. They didn't bid out or anything, and I think that says a whole lot. I would be real depressed if I had to leave this school. I would think of it is a challenge in one way, but I like everybody here, I like working with the teachers and I love the kids here and I like what we have going here.

In summary, the transformation of Valencia Park Elementary School started with a need to change and was fueled by the courage and commitment of many to create a school climate that pulled people together rather than drove people away. The three factors that had the greatest influence on the transformation were: (1) a clearly defined shared decision-making model, (2) the activities of the principal, and (3) the influence relationships that evolved.

### Shared Decision Making

#### Structure

When I selected Valencia Park Elementary School for this study I was not aware that the school had implemented the Comer School Development Program in 1989. I knew that several schools in our district were called *Comer schools*, however, I did not know what distinguished them from other schools. I was also not aware to what extent shared decision making existed at Valencia Park. I had a hunch that a school with as many challenges as this one had, and was still able to make significant changes, must be doing something extraordinary. Through my research, I discovered that the staff at Valencia Park was deeply committed to the shared decision-making process. Making a shift from a top-down form of decision making to a participatory

form of decision making was rather revolutionary. There is no easy, clear definition of shared decision making, and based on the literature review for this study and my personal experience, I believe very few schools have truly embraced the notion of shared decision making. One area of difficulty is in defining the scope of authority. The types of questions that tend to come up are: (1) What decisions will the principal make alone, if any? (2) What decisions will the governance team make? (3) What decisions will standing committees make? and, (4) Are there decisions that will require a staff vote? The Comer model provided the school with some guidelines and structure. The program has demonstrated its ability to make a difference by creating new structures, by focusing on human relationships, and human development, and integrating everyone into the learning community (Comer, 1980).

Soon after hearing Dr. Comer speak in 1988 and "after gaining board approval in 1989, a team of parents, teachers, and other staff members spent the year outlining a plan and rehashing ideas" (Shipley, 1992, p. 20). Full implementation took place in July 1990 when Diana Shipley was assigned as the new school principal. The organizational structure of the Comer model required administrators, teachers, classified staff, and parents to work together in the best interest of children. Shipley recalled:

The collaborative efforts involving parents, school staff members, and community members to create a governance and management team was a key for me as we began to implement the Comer model at Valencia Park. (1992, p. 20)

The Comer School Development Program provided a definition and a structure for the process. It is a systems approach to school management consisting of the following nine components (See Figure 1). These nine components provided Valencia Park with a philosophical foundation and a

# School Development Program

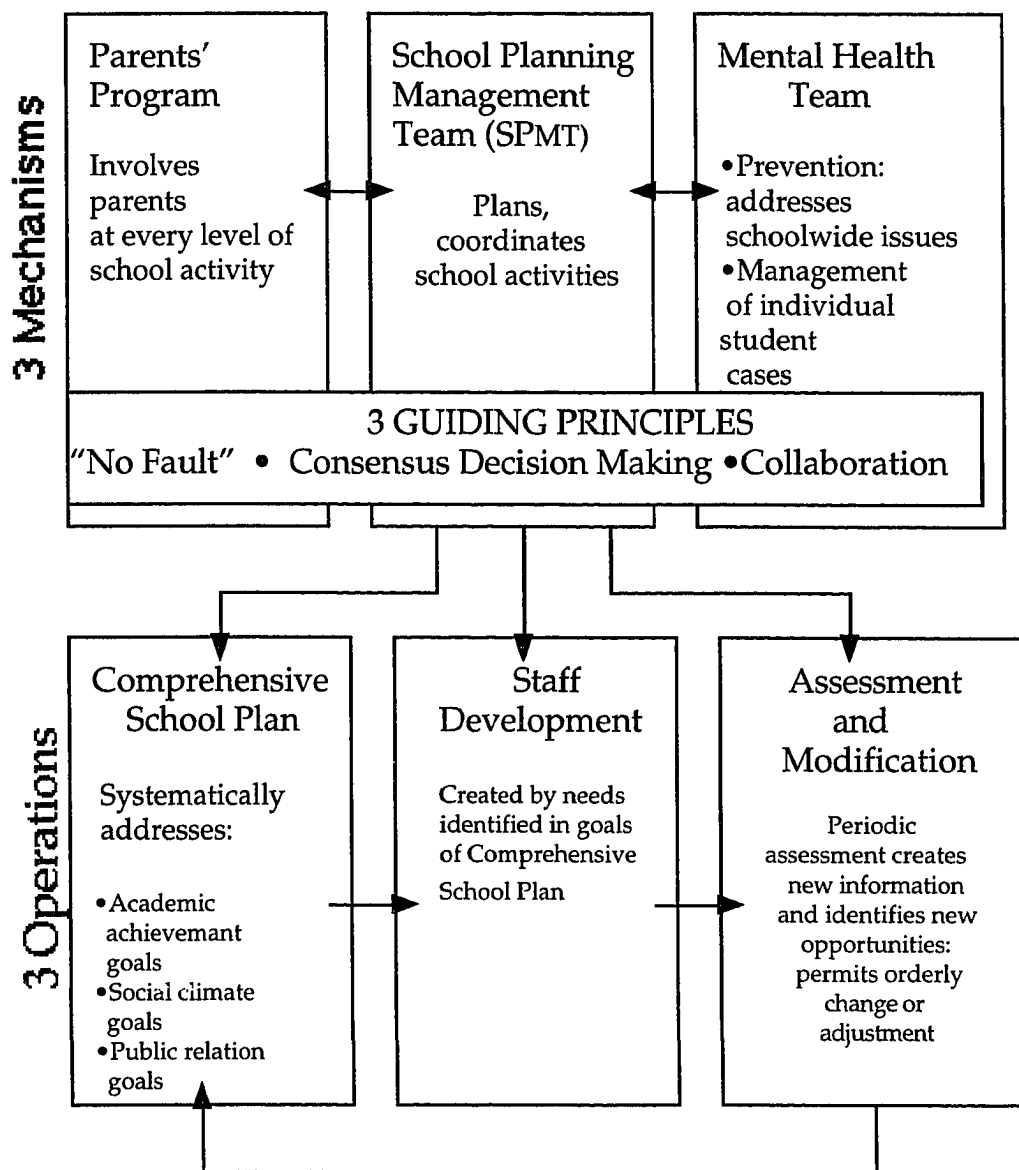


Figure 1. The chart depicts the nine components of the Comer School Development Program: three guiding principles, three mechanisms, and the three operations. Yale Child Study Center, School Development Program, 55 College Street, New Haven Connecticut.

systemic structure from which to begin restructuring the school. A major goal of the Comer program is to integrate schools with their communities using a team approach to students' welfare and education. The model stresses the need for teachers and parents to work together to identify social skills that they both can nurture in the children.

At Valencia Park, the focus includes fostering mutual respect, developing a sense of right and wrong, and communicating well, according to resource teacher, Rosalind Jackson. With everyone working together toward a common goal, she said, students no longer have to deal with one set of values at home and another at school. (Seff, 1995, p. 1)

Between 1988 and 1995 the staff was involved in a process of adapting the nine components of the Comer model to meet the needs of the students at Valencia Park Elementary School. For example: The School Planning and Management Team meets the requirements established by the school district for representation by stakeholders on governance teams. Representation on the governance team includes: the principal or designee, parent representatives (a majority of whom are not employed at the school site), certificated employee representatives (three teacher representatives from grades kindergarten through second and three from grades three through five), the PTA or other designated parent group representative, and, a representative from the San Diego Teachers Association, the Classified Employee Association, and the California School Employees Association. This governing body meets twice a month.

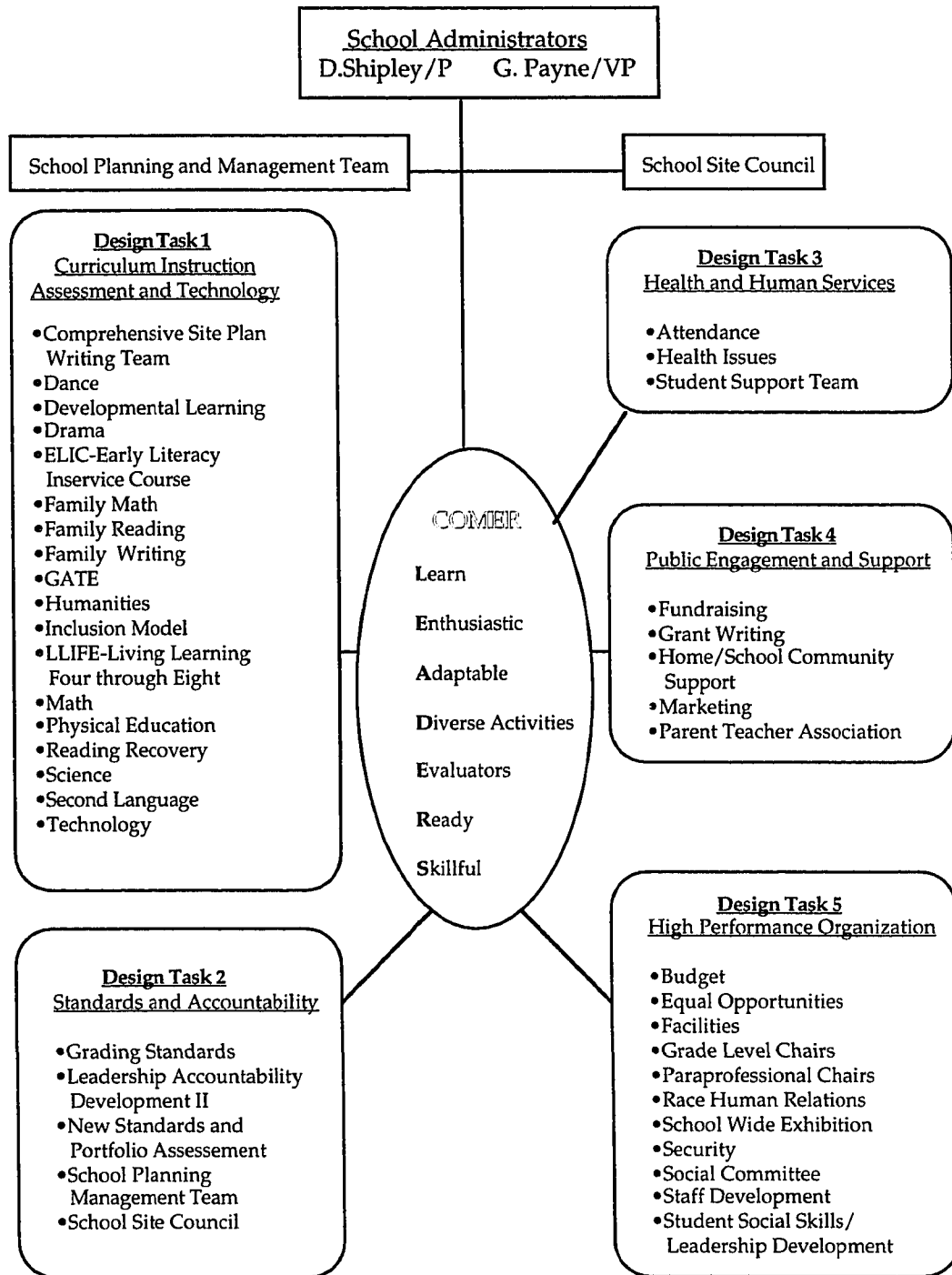
The School Planning and Management Team utilizes the talents and interests of parents and school staff as a representative body to address the governance and management issues of the school. Team members work as collaborative decision makers to develop policies, procedures, and

programs that affect the academic and social climate of the school. The principal serves as the co-chair of the group ("Valencia Park Center," 1995).

In addition to the School Planning and Management Team, there are several other committees that are a part of the shared decision-making structure at Valencia Park. The School Site Council is composed of parents and school personnel. The council must operate according to district, state, and federal guidelines. The council's primary responsibility is to monitor and approve the spending of Title 1 resources. The School Site Council meets once a month. A third committee, the Student Support Team, meets on a weekly basis. The Student Support Team "was responsible for overseeing the child development needs of students through focus on individual students and also the identification of larger school issues which relate to the students" ("Valencia Park Center," 1995). In the Comer model this is referred to as the Mental Health Team. Grade level teams meet every other week and every two months they meet across grade levels for the purpose of articulation. And finally, task committees meet as needed. The task committees included: staff development, technology, race human relations, and, grading. These teams and, committees are depicted in Figure 2.

This structure did not appear overnight. It evolved over a period of seven years. It demonstrates how Valencia Park Elementary School took the components of a model for restructuring and adapted it to meet the needs of its student population and fulfilled the requirements for the district. The Five Design Tasks were the superintendent's expectations for each school in the San Diego Unified School District. Schools were required to demonstrate how they would meet these expectations. This network of teams and committees at Valencia Park is driven by the three guiding principles of the

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Valencia Park Center for Academics, Drama and Dance**



**Figure 2.** Flow chart depicting the teams, committees, and design tasks that provide the structure for the shared decision-making process.

Comer program: the no-fault policy, consensus decision making, and collaboration.

In addition to the three guiding principals identified in the Comer program, the principle that *decisions are made in the best interest of children* and the affirmation program had an influence on the changes experienced at Valencia Park. Posted in the main office, the library, on bulletin boards in classrooms and hallways was the principle *decisions are made in the best interest of children*, and the affirmation for the month. These five elements formulated the school's philosophical foundation. I believe this philosophy inspired the school staff to stay focused on its role as educators and as change agents.

The structure and philosophy of the Comer model provided the definition and the guidelines for the shared decision-making process that was operating at Valencia Park. *All* the committees, teams, design tasks, and principles were interconnected and formed the decision-making process. The process was viewed by the stakeholders from a holistic perspective. Shared decision making was not limited to one committee. One example of the decision-making process took place in the fall of 1995. During the summer of 1995, the district superintendent, Dr. Bertha Pendleton, made it very clear to the principals in the district that she wanted the schools to focus heavily on literacy. "I am recommending that we establish a goal for next year of improving reading achievement by ten percent" ("Valencia Park," 1995). She strongly encouraged principals to organize and implement a comprehensive and balanced reading program that was research-based and that combined skills development with literature and language-based activities. Shipley brought this issue to the SPMT in September of 1995. After much discussion, it was decided that each grade level team should design a schoolwide reading

program and present it to the entire staff for their input. At the next staff meeting each grade level team presented its program. The pros and cons of each program were discussed and debated until the staff reached consensus on one that they were willing to implement. The process from beginning to end took four weeks. This was not one committee's decision; the entire staff contributed to process. Not all decisions were made this way, however, important teaching and learning decisions that had an impact on the entire school involved this process.

The San Diego Unified School District recommended that each school's governance document clarify the scope of the decision-making authority of the governance team. "An appropriate means of outlining this scope of decision-making authority may be to provide three sections setting forth: (1) the authority of the principal, (2) the authority of the governance team, and (3) the authority of the total school staff (community)" ("San Diego Unified School District," 1993). Valencia Park Elementary School had a school charter which defined the scope of authority for the School Planning and Management Team, the School Site Council, and the task committees. It did not delineate the role of the principal in the decision-making process except to say that the principal is the co-chair of the School Planning and Management Team. When asked about the governance team's role in making changes regarding teaching and learning, one teacher answered:

We don't have the power to do everything. I believe that it is understood that Diana Shipley is the principal and that there are certain powers that she holds because there are certain responsibilities that she holds. I think that the staff members all agreed that she has information and connections that we don't have, and some understandings that we don't have, and we depend on her to be the principal. That's what she is. At the same time we



do feel strongly about shared decision making.

Even though Shipley's role was not clearly defined in terms of what decisions she had the sole power to make, several of the staff members I interviewed expected Shipley to make some decisions and not bring every item to the governance team. When I asked Shipley about her scope of authority, she responded:

The staff knows I am going to make cut and dried decisions. Sometime there's no other way to go. I think they trust that if I have to make arbitrary decisions, which is not very often, there is a reason why. If it's something that I can do that they didn't need to have to come and meet for three weeks, I think they are comfortable with that, because I think they have the opportunity to be involved in enough. Sometimes they just want to teach.

It would be very difficult to anticipate all the decisions that need to be made in the day-to-day operation of managing a school. Some decisions need to be made on the spot. As an administrator at the school stated:

Not all decisions can be made by the governing bodies. There are daily decisions that need to be made and they need to be made right on the spot by Diana or myself, and we just make those decisions. It's based on well grounded principles, however, that to my knowledge would be supported by all the governing bodies.

Except for the day-to-day decisions, the staff participated in the majority of the decisions that needed to be made at Valencia Park. Before the School Planning and Management Team made a decision on an issue, staff members had the opportunity to participate through their grade level team meetings and/or the monthly staff meetings. One teacher described the range of issues and concerns brought to the SPMT.

The team discusses from the most minuscule, trivial little things--things that we thought were kind of trivial--all the way up to the most important things, which last year was putting together the funds for networking the school on computers--how we wanted to go about doing it, how much money we wanted to spend, what specific things we wanted to incorporate into the system. It goes from the smallest thing to the largest thing and everything in between.

In terms of defining the scope of authority, one teacher simply stated: "It's a balance and I don't know what the perfect balance is, but it seems to be working for us."

### Communication

The teams and committees formed the structure, and the structure provided the opportunity for communication. Communication occurred within the teams and committees and among the teams and the committees. In a very basic and practical sense, the structure and the lines of communication formed the foundation from which the system operated. How effective the system worked was determined by the extent to which the communication occurred within the system. Communication at Valencia Park took many forms.

The staff and parents were kept well informed through written memos and documents. Written minutes were kept for each meeting and a copy was sent to Shipley. If staff members had a concern, they filled out the *yellow concern presentation form* and gave it to a representative on the School Planning and Management Team (See Figure 3). The SPMT returned the form to the staff member with a written response. In addition, the response was entered into the SPMT minutes which was distributed to staff members. On a weekly basis the staff received a bulletin from Shipley highlighting

Valencia Park Center  
Concern Presentation Format  
(Global Issues)

Brief Statement of Concern

Possible Solutions

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Solution(s) Agreed Upon

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Follow Up

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Closure

Date of presentation of concern \_\_\_\_\_

Date of closure to concern \_\_\_\_\_

Submitted by \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3. Concern form used at Valencia Park Elementary School.

upcoming events. One teacher stated:

We all know what's going on. Even though last year and the year before I was not on the SPMT, I knew exactly what our school was about--what our focus was going to be, what our problems were, what are concerns were.

In the spring and fall of 1995 some of the concerns raised were: (1) students returning to class late from lunch, (2) parking lot safety, (3) student portfolios, and (4) raising the reading levels of students.

Parents were kept informed by reading the monthly newsletters, checking their child's *school planner* each day, and by reading the information sent home with their child every Thursday. The community liaison commented:

We give them so much information because we want them to be abreast. So, if you wanted to interview my parents this morning, I would have felt real comfortable with that because they know the school, they know its programs, so I wouldn't have had a problem with that. They can tell you just as much about what is going on as I can.

In addition to written communications, the staff was kept well informed through an intercom system and through e-mail. Each morning the principal or the vice principal read the daily bulletin, reminded the students and staff of the monthly affirmation, and lead the pledge of allegiance over the intercom system. Due to the nature of their job, teachers do not have lots of opportunity during the day to communicate with one another. The e-mail network provided the staff with the opportunity to communicate with one other in a timely and efficient manner.

Having the internet now really makes a big difference. We can just type it out. A teacher asked if we [magnet resource teachers] could pull out two or three of his kids and help them with reading. So I e-mailed him and said

sure, I can't give him an exact schedule, but when I can, I'll go with those kids and tutor them.

The opportunity for oral communication was provided through the meeting structure, through Shipley's open door policy and her continuous support and encouragement to parents and staff to voice their opinion. During my interview with the vice principal, he commented:

There seems to be a free flow of information back and forth. There doesn't seem to be any hesitancy on the part of persons who are not in administrative positions to voice their opinions. I think that there is that atmosphere of we're in this together so let's solve the problems. There just seems to be a good give and take.

One teacher confirmed what a number of the staff felt.

Mrs. Shipley and the team [SPMT] are always open. No one is excluded from sitting in on those meetings or participating in those meetings. If they decide not to come, it's their decision, it's nothing that Mrs. Shipley has closed the door on. She is very open about that, she wants more people to participate. Not only does she do that in the governance team meetings but she does that in every aspect of the school. Everyone's opinion is valuable to Mrs. Shipley.

By formulating a structure and creating a supportive atmosphere for communication, discussion and debate among the stakeholders became an integral aspect of the shared decision-making process at Valencia Park. The staff members felt they had the opportunity and the responsibility to participate in the decision-making process. One teacher described shared decision making with the following analogy.

The main thing about being on the governance team is a feeling of--to use a special education term, *inclusion*--and it makes you feel a part of

of whatever you have to serve. The analogy is: you have something to bring to the potluck. You're not just asked to visit someone's house and sit and eat whatever they have to offer.

After seven years of participating in the decision-making process, the staff felt very comfortable making decisions. One teacher commented: "The more decisions teachers make, the more they want to make; involving teachers and parents have created changes." One former administrator of Valencia Park described shared decision making as:

A technique used to run any kind of a business, plant or school, where you value the judgment of all the people involved, especially those closest to any problem that might come up. You spend a lot of time meeting, talking, and planning.

The atmosphere and the level of communication that existed in meetings throughout the school enabled the stakeholders to participate in consensus decision making.

#### Consensus Decision Making

At Valencia Park Elementary School, decisions were made by reaching consensus. Decisions that had an impact on a number of the staff members and parents, such as changes in school policy, programs, or a change in the school day, were discussed at staff meetings, grade level team meetings, and the School Site Council before going to the School Planning and Management Team meeting. At the SPMT meeting the issues are presented, discussed, and debated before a consensus is reached. A member described the process.

We usually brainstorm first and discuss it and then we come up with a solution and if one of us doesn't agree, then that person just doesn't agree. That person has the right not to agree, but we hope that person will support us if he/she doesn't agree. There's many times that

Diana herself, if she doesn't agree with something, will go along with it. I myself, I am the same way.

The staff and parents I interviewed agreed that even though the process of reaching consensus is sometimes very time consuming and cumbersome, they felt it was working and making a difference at Valencia Park. The process of meeting, discussing, debating, and planning kept the staff and community well informed. One teacher spoke of the process as providing consistency.

Consistency! It's wonderful. Do you know how wonderful it is to work when you know exactly what your focus is, instead of, wait a minute--what did you say last week we were going to do? No, don't you remember we changed it--it came out in that memo, you know. We were indoctrinated, but with the wrong information.

In addition to the opportunity for discussion and debate, there were several other informational factors that had an influence on the decision-making process at Valencia Park. During several School Planning and Management Team meetings, I observed the team reaching consensus on an issue influenced by the knowledge and expertise of one or two members of the team. Due to the nature of their job, administrators and resource teachers often had more information to offer the team regarding a specific issue or concern. Gene Paine, the vice principal commented:

I think information that persons come to the meeting with is very important. That might be an advantage that administrators have over other members of the governing bodies because just the position itself allows us to have more information, and information, of course, is powerful. So, possibly other members of the committee look to administrators for guidance because we have access to more

information and in some cases more experience in solving problems because that's what administrative positions entail--solving problems. So in that sense I suppose administrators are looked to for decisions. Sometimes, we are asked: "How do you feel about this and that?" and I suppose because of that we can influence the ultimate decisions that are made.

Often during the SPMT meetings, I observed members other than administrators share knowledge and expertise that had an influence on the decision-making process. This information was based on their own experience or a result of collaboration within their representative group. One teacher, who had been very active on the SPMT since its inception, shared:

We really listen to each other's opinions and we vote based on the information that people are giving out. I like the decisions where Diana will go around the table and ask from two or three people she hasn't heard from to give their opinion. I think a parent would influence my decision a lot.

Both administrators at Valencia Park were very aware of how information could have a powerful influence on the decision-making process. Both were very willing to share information. During one of my interviews with the vice principal, he commented:

I try to share information. I know information is power, I want to share that information with folks so that they have more knowledge and that makes my job ultimately easier. Information is shared to empower everyone as much as possible.

In addition to providing the staff with the latest information from the district office, Shipley shared professional articles she acquired from conferences she



attended or information from current educational literature. One teacher expressed what a number of teachers felt:

Diana reads a lot of literature, she gets a lot of information and a lot of what we do is ahead of what the district does. It's nice to have a leader looking ahead as opposed to being one step behind and always having to rush to get things done--to catch up.

The sharing of information was two-way. Shipley received research and newspaper articles from the staff.

### Philosophical Foundation

Three of the five guiding principles formulate the school's philosophical foundation: the no-fault policy, decisions are made in the best interest of children, and monthly affirmations. These principles had a tremendous influence on the decision-making process at Valencia Park. These three guiding principles were posted on bulletin boards in classrooms, in hallways, in the library, and in the room where the School Planning and Management Team held their meetings.

The staff at Valencia Park were very committed to developing the social skills of their students, especially in the area of self-esteem. The following statement was included in the student's daily planner.

School personnel should provide an environment that enhances a student's self-esteem. Self-esteem, valuing oneself, is a requisite for making moral decisions and for esteeming other persons. Students are responsible for their own judgments and should be encouraged to express their own views and to respond respectfully to the views of others.

The affirmation program was an effort to assist students in the development of self-esteem. Each month a new affirmation was introduced to the staff and students. It was recited daily during the morning announcements, posted on

bulletin boards, and was included in the parent newsletter. "Through affirmations, we are encouraged to accept responsibility for ourselves, to understand power and influence, and to believe in freedom, hope, choice, and change" (Shipley, 1992, p. 21). Some of the affirmation statements included: (1) Everyday I have an opportunity, (2) I am an important person in this world, and (3) It may be difficult, but it is possible. Many of the staff members found this program to be especially important during the initial stages of the change process. One teacher explained:

I think the change was [due to] the affirmations first. When you start seeing these affirmations posted around, you start to think about yourself differently, and when you start thinking of yourself differently, you start thinking of others differently.

Several of the participants talked about the positive focus of affirmations, and how they had made the affirmations a part of their personal lives.

I actually use affirmations in other parts of my life [outside of school work] that I feel I need to stay focused on. I think that is an important part. If nothing else, it simply reminds me that this is what I want to do and this is what the focus should be and it keeps me on track.

A second guiding principle that had a significant influence on the decision-making process was the no-fault policy. The no-fault policy "discourages blaming; focuses on problem solving, finding solutions" ("Valencia Park Center," 1995b). One teacher expressed the views of a number of the staff members:

When we have a problem, whether in relation to curriculum or things we need to have changed here at the school, the no-fault policy has made it a lot more positive--a more positive situation to look for a solutions without looking for blame--and I think that it has made it a more expedient process.

And because of that, we get away from name calling or the blame setting or any of those human kinds of responses that we have. We just look for the good of the process and we work for that so we get to solutions a lot faster. I think it's a real professional process and it's a more productive attitude.

Paine explained the policy in terms of working with children.

We have the no-fault philosophy and the total staff seems to use that philosophy on a daily basis. We work with the youngsters to find out what their problem area might be and try to solve those problems and not point fingers at them and say they are bad or no good.

Over the years the no-fault philosophy has become a part of the school climate. Shipley reflected:

We don't even have to mouth the no-fault policy anymore. I mean we very, very rarely mention no-fault. We did the first three years. We just used the terms constantly, and then last year I found it getting better and this year, I don't even know if I've heard it this year.

The guiding principle, *making decisions in the best interest of children*, also had a tremendous influence on the school climate. As early as my second visit to Valencia Park, it was clearly evident that meeting the needs of children was the primary focus of the staff. Every person I interviewed expressed his/her affection for all the students in the school and not just the 25-30 they had in that person's class.

This is a school community, I can talk to another teacher who has never dealt with one of my students in a classroom setting, but they will know a lot of information about that child just by being part of the school community. Everyone is here for the kids. I think the kids feel it, and they feel that they are a very important part of this school. That it, the school, is

truly here for them.

During one of my interviews with Shipley, she stressed the importance of the staff staying focused on the children. She felt that the purpose of the governance structure was to see what the school could do to improve the achievement and socialization of the children. She went on to explain:

The emphasis is on teaching and learning, not only from the SPMT and the School Site Council, but from parent involvement, from the classroom, teacher grade level meetings. Everything we do, we keep that focus ahead of us. What can we do to improve our school, the children, academically and socially, using all the different stakeholders we have?

The affirmation program, the no-fault policy, and the emphasis on children, provided the staff and parents at Valencia Park with a very strong philosophical foundation from which to make the necessary changes to meet the needs of the students.

Acceptance and understanding of the Comer philosophy and structure did not happen over night. When the school made the decision to shift from a top-down form of decision making to a shared form of decision making by implementing the nine components of the Comer program, the staff realized that training was necessary ingredient. As mentioned earlier, training in the areas of implementation of the nine components started in the planning year and continued when Shipley arrived in 1990 in the area of collaboration. Everyone recognized a need for on-going training. Each year approximately half of the School Planning and Management Team rotated off and new members joined the team. In addition, there were times when the school needed to hire new staff members. Parents new to the governance team were especially unfamiliar with the decision-making process and needed lots of training. One new parent I interviewed discussed the training.

We had a three and a half hour training session at the beginning of the school year. We went over a lot of information, a lot of background, the Comer Program, and some idea of what we would have to deal with as members of the team. I think it was very beneficial in helping us get off on the right track. I went into it not really knowing a lot about what goes on with the administration and the school, so it has taken me a little bit of time to get up to speed.

It is one thing to have a structure and philosophy in place for shared decision making, but someone has to take responsibility for keeping it going. At Valencia Park the principal had a significant role in influencing the staff and parents to participate in the process of managing and leading the school.

#### The Activities of the Principal

In his postindustrial definition of leadership, Rost stated that "leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and collaborators who intend real change that reflects their mutual purposes" (1994b, p. 7). At Valencia Park Elementary School, the shared decision-making process provided the staff and the parents the opportunity to participate in such a leadership process. Through collaboration, the staff and parents created changes at the school that reflected their mutual purposes. In addition to his definition of leadership, Rost identified 12 skills leaders and collaborators need to participate in the leadership process.

1. Influence multidirectional relationships
2. Build noncoercive relationships
3. Focus on the process and not just on the content
4. Include as many different people as possible
5. Take risks
6. Allow for conflict among collaborators

7. Facilitate large groups
8. Empower others in the organization
9. Be political in your influence strategies
10. Use ordinary resources to influence
11. Get comfortable with highly complex, messy, dynamic situations
12. Advocate for the commons. (1994b, p. 1)

Through my research, I discovered many of these skills and behaviors practiced by the principal, the staff, and the parents at Valencia Park.

### Sharing Power

Between 1985 and 1995, the school had three principals who operated in ways that were significantly different than the previous principals. All three principals had an important role to play in bringing about the changes that took place at Valencia Park between 1988 and 1995. A teacher who had been teaching at Valencia Park for 17 years recalled:

Then in 1985 we got the lady tiger herself in here and that's when the changes really started for more than the better--they really began. Doors opened. She was a really good principal. She was really quiet and kept to herself, but she knew our school and she knew how people felt and she was always here, and *that* we appreciated. I've seen a lot of changes here in my 17 years.

As noted, in 1988, the principal, the vice principal, and several of the teachers from Valencia Park heard James Comer speak at an integration conference. As stated earlier, the team was very excited about the Comer program. Dubuque was instrumental in initiating and fostering the relationship between the district and Yale University. Soon after the transition started, Dubuque left Valencia Park and Cansdale took over as principal for a half year. He continued to pursue the relationship with Yale

University, working towards implementation of the Comer program. Dubuque and Cansdale realized the school needed to change and were willing to take a risk. During one of my interviews with Cansdale, he expressed his attitudes about the Comer model and the role of the leadership team.

Leadership is important with the Comer model. The leadership team has to really embrace what that's all about and live it and model it and keep it alive. If that doesn't happen, you can say that you're a Comer School but you're not. You can have the nine mechanisms in place, but there's a real affective strand through that model--the importance of relationships and building a sense of community--that is really contingent on the leadership commitment and an understanding of what Comer is all about. It's not just those nine mechanisms.

The most significant change that took place at Valencia Park during this time was the decision-making process. The school evolved from a traditional, hierarchical model to a more inclusive model. Dubuque and Cansdale knew that a major component of the Comer program was to involve parents and staff in the decision-making process. They trusted their instincts and embraced the notion of sharing the decision making and leadership processes. In 1990 Shipley became principal and continued to expand the roles of parents and staff members in the decision-making process. All three principals were eager to include as many different people as possible. One teacher described the roles each of these principals played.

Carolyn [Dubuque] started a type of leadership that involved a lot of support people. She would have weekly meetings with the resource teachers, the principal, and the vice principal--so we were almost in the beginning of shared decision making, but just the top echelon were included at that point. It was a more broader-based decision making at that

point. When Carolyn left and Rich [Cansdale] came in, that was when we first officially started an SPMT that involved parents and teachers. I remember in the beginning I think everybody was very paranoid about what was going to happen. When we first got into the room, we were actually very top heavy in administration. When Diana came here we still had in place all the resource teachers and the administrators on the SPMT. Basically what we did was just add parents and teachers to that existing group. I know this was one of the first things Diana noticed. So one of the first things we addressed when Diana came here was fairer representation on the SPMT.

Valencia Park was very fortunate during that time to have three principals that were very willing to take a risk and had the confidence in themselves, their staff and parents, to pursue the changes that were needed at Valencia Park. "They were willing to focus on the process and not just the content" (Rost, 1994b, p. 1). During my interview with Dubuque, she described her role as principal to work with others and to keep the processes moving.

I think one of the key things the principal does, and it's not just the academic part, it's having a huge picture in your mind and knowing which people you need to see each day to keep a part of it moving, whether it's the academics or the discipline area or personnel that's falling apart.

Keeping this huge juggling thing in your mind and everyday focus on where you're going.

These three principals recognized that each person had a part to play in keeping the school going and moving forward. They were willing to expand the role of teachers and parents in the decision-making process.



### Trust through Empowerment

Shipley became principal in July of 1990. This was the first official year the school was considered a *Comer School*. The School Planning and Management Team was in place, and the staff and parents had already experienced shared decision making. In 1990 the San Diego Unified School District, in an effort to institutionalize shared decision making, required each school in the district to form a governance team and to write a school governance document. Having a document and governance team in place did not mean that the stakeholders would have a voice in the decision-making process. Someone had to take the responsibility for ensuring that staff and parents participated in the process of moving the school forward in meeting the needs of the students. "The degree to which school-level authority is shared and how it is shared is in the hands of the principal" (Flanigan & Richardson, 1991, p. 10). Shared decision making does not mean that every decision must be shared. As the designated leader of the school, the principal will determine to what extent the staff and parents are involved in the decision-making process. Regardless of a mandate from the district office, if the principal does not want to share the decision making and leadership of the school, they will not be shared. It was clear that Shipley had a significant influence on the decision-making and leadership processes at Valencia Park.

Shipley used "persuasion to influence multidirectional relationships" (Rost, 1994b, p. 2). She strongly believed that it was in the best interest of children to involve parents and staff in the decision-making process. It is very easy to become emotionally attached to a situation when children are involved. Shipley supported the creation of multidirectional relationships by

appealing to a higher ground in terms of taking a moral stand with regards to children. When the opportunity to involve others in the process was available, Shipley took advantage of the situation. The Comer model advocated that the principal chair or co-chair the School Planning and Management Team meetings. Rather than chair the meetings Diana elected to co-chair the meetings because "it gives people a little bit more experience in leading and organizing meetings, and just being a part of the structure."

Shipley demonstrated her willingness to involve others by her open-door policy, encouragement, and expectation that staff and parents speak up and become part of the decision-making process.

It makes them a plank owner of the school. It gives them a voice in the school and makes the school a part of them, and like I said, not only for the teachers that have been here for 25 years, but also the teachers that have been here for two days. She gives everyone a voice in the school.

More than giving teachers a voice, Shipley expected staff and parents to speak up and share their ideas and concerns. "Don't let one or two teachers be the mouth piece for everyone, then you retreat back to the classroom mad and angry because your idea wasn't shared." Many of the people I interviewed told me that Shipley constantly reminded the staff and parents to voice their opinion. She empowered others by "getting collaborators to proactively raise issues and by believing in the collaborators and their willingness to pursue higher purposes" (Rost, 1994b, p. 9). Over the years the staff had come to trust that Shipley was sincere and truly wanted them to express their feelings and ideas whether or not she was in agreement with them. She was very open to dialogue and debate, as verified by one of the parents on the School Planning and Management Team.

The teachers know that they can disagree and not be reprimanded or have

Diana or anyone else hold that against them. I think that's the important part because they can say--it doesn't mean they'll always get what they want, but I think just being able to voice opinions and voice what they think is important. Not any one person is going to have all the right answers and that's another thing that I have noticed about Diana. When someone comes up with a better way of doing it or a better idea, she is willing to change her idea or her views on how things should be. Shipley influenced the decision-making and leadership processes at Valencia Park by creating an atmosphere of trust by modeling and expecting open, honest communication. "In a lot of ways Diana is the glue that brings it together because she wants to hear what we have to say. I think we have always felt the freedom with her to speak what we think."

#### Two-way Communication Is Key

In describing Shipley, many of the people I interviewed used the words: *strong, direct, flexible, and visionary*. In addition, I observed Shipley to use "ordinary power resources to influence the decision-making process by being on time, prepared, positive, and productive" (Rost, 1994b, p. 11). She started meetings promptly and when she knew it was going to be a tight agenda, she had someone act as a timekeeper. She stayed well informed and was constantly providing the staff with information from the district and articles from the current research. During one of my interviews with Shipley, she shared:

Two things really bother me: ignorance and people not knowing where to get information. You don't have to know everything but you sure should know where to get the answers. Communication is so important. It's important to me in my job and it's important to me in my home. One teacher spoke of her strength in this way.

Diana is a very strong administrator. She is a good people person. She inspires people to do their very best. She gives them many opportunities to achieve in areas other than just the classroom or whatever their main job is. In other words, she is very willing to help people assume leadership roles. She is a high profile principal--always available, always ready to help.

In addition to her strength, Shipley was described as being very direct and up front. One person commented: "several times at meetings she has said, "If we're going to make a decision, let's do it here before everyone, and not second guess. Let's get it out now and take care of it." Shipley used her political influence by "using open meetings to allow people to vent their feelings" (Rost, 1994b, p. 10). In her own words.

I think they saw me role playing and being a role model and walking my talk. If I said I was going to do something, I did it. If I said I wasn't going to do something, I was up front about it by saying, "No, you can't do that. This is the way I think we need to go." Being a leader and also really pulling them in and giving them the accolades they needed when they needed it, and going to them, being visible, going to them and saying, "What do you think we need to do here?" and "How do you feel about so and so?" The more you do that, the more they think "Well, gee, this person is really listening to me."

The staff and parents admired Shipley's strength and directness. "I see her as a strong facilitator. I think she guides and directs in a very positive way." Because of her strength and directness, they felt they knew where they stood, and were empowered by her honesty. It became very clear that the staff trusted her, and was fully engaged in working with her to meet the needs of the students and the community. They too talked about making decisions in

the best interest of children and spoke of the comfort in feeling free to voice their opinion. In addition to her strength and honesty, Shipley was respected for her willingness to be open to changing her opinion. She empowered others in the relationship by giving up control and giving collaborators some decision-making power.

She is willing to change her mind about some thing based on the feedback from other people--teachers or whoever else is on the team--and I think that's important too because otherwise, why even voice your concerns if you know it's not going to change things. But knowing that if you have a good idea and you can communicate your idea and show her there's a better way of doing something, she will accept it; I think that helps create the open feeling of communication.

In addition, Shipley was described as a person with a clear vision. One teacher used the following metaphor to express his feelings about her. It reflects the feelings of many teachers.

She's like a bus driver--she has a destination. And I think her destination is always there for the kids. But when you get on her bus as an employer-rider, you can choose where you sit on the bus as long as you arrive at her destination.

The staff and parents were very comfortable with the fact that Shipley had a clear vision and that she shared it. I would even say that the staff expected it. What I found very interesting about Shipley was that even though she had a rather authoritarian, commanding presence, she was admired and respected by the staff and parents for her eagerness to collaborate.

As far as principals go, she's like a Patton or Eisenhower, she has that kind of loyalty, that kind of magnetism and she doesn't try to run the show. She believes in spreading it around so everyone has a part in the

overall running of the school. And she says that if you don't put into the school, you don't have any reason to complain, so everybody has an active part within the structure of the school, from the newest to the oldest teacher.

Shipley realized that two-way communication was the key to shared decision making. "The biggest thing I think out of everything is communication." She believed it was her responsibility to keep the staff well informed. Shipley believed that if the staff and parents were kept well informed, they could make sound decisions. Shipley communicated with the staff and parents in a variety of ways. Each morning she read announcements over the intercom system, wrote a weekly staff bulletin, wrote a monthly parent newsletter, and distributed the minutes from the SPMT meetings. Shipley kept herself well informed about what was going on at the school by attending grade level and task committee meetings when possible. Because it was impossible for her to attend all the meetings, she received the minutes of each meeting that took place.

The communication is so important. They take minutes and give me copies and I'll either say "Okay, I want to go to your next meeting" or I'll call the chair in, because I feel like the chair is quite capable of communicating back. They know I read the minutes, they want me to because I'll respond back in some way.

#### Personal Belief System

Because Shipley believed so strongly in the process, she empowered others to participate in the shared decision-making process. She was committed to making a difference at Valencia Park, and truly believed that collaboration with parents and staff could bring forth the changes needed to ensure student achievement. She also believed that the process of shared decision making

was not limited to the School Planning and Management Team. She recognized that all the teams and groups that existed within the school were all connected and the entire network made up the shared decision-making process.

The components are all connected and interrelated and it's not easy to have them all working in concert, so as you work the program. The principal has to have sense enough to put key people in each one of those components--there is no way I could do all of it. I've got to be able to trust and delegate, otherwise it's just too much. Thank heaven I do have a good support team, very responsible, accountable people, and they work hard. It's been a good experience.

Shipley believed strongly in the philosophical ideals of the Comer model, the no-fault policy and that decisions are made in the best interest of children. She demonstrated her sense of integrity by living and modeling those ideals. By re-enforcing the no-fault policy, noncoercive relationships existed among the staff, parents, and administrators. People in the relationship were positive and productive, and active rather than passive.

I personally have never seen her point the finger or anything like that. She is the type of person that will take charge when she sees things aren't working out. She just won't let it go by, she takes charge and I appreciate that. I would rather have a principal who works with solutions and will take charge of things when things aren't getting done. It's nice to know she is on campus.

By developing a culture of openness and honesty, Shipley helped to create noncoercive relationships at Valencia Park. She modeled the behavior and expected others to participate in the relationship. One staff member stated:

She is a very direct and honest person. She likes dialogue. She

appreciates your being up front with her and letting her know exactly what you think. She gives you every opportunity to do that and expects it.

Shipley truly believed that all decisions made were to be in the best interest of children. By keeping the focus on the children, the relationships between the leaders and collaborators were built around a sense of purpose. The statement, "decisions are made in the best interest of children," came up over and over again in the interviews and I saw the statement posted on bulletin boards throughout the school. "Diana says that a lot and I think that she really means it! What is best for kids, bottom line, that's what she believes in and that's the feeling that comes across at SPMT." Her strong belief system inspired and empowered others to focus on the student achievement of all students.

The behaviors and skills Shipley exhibited were a major influence in creating an atmosphere that invited, and often times demanded, participation by the stakeholders. In the words of one parent: "Diana is really in touch with the kinds of things that need to be in place--the attitudes that need to be in place and she sets the tone." An atmosphere existed at Valencia Park that provided the opportunity for collaboration. The fact that Shipley truly believed in and modeled open, honest communication empowered others to participate in the process. One teacher reflected:

Probably the most essential part of making this [shared decision making] work is that the person in charge has to believe in it and has to live it themselves or it's not going to be sincere and it's not going to come across. That's what Diana does--she lives it herself and that's what makes it work.

The principal recognized that, for some, this was a change in attitude and that it would not take place overnight. "It takes work, it's not a quick fix, you have to work at changing attitudes and developing relationships. I think they



have to see me model all the components." During one of my interviews with Shipley, I asked her where she would place herself on a scale ranging from a top-down management model to a participatory model. She placed herself in the middle. "People need to know that someone is at the top, and that top person will always be accountable. When it comes down to it, the assistant superintendent of the district is going to call me, she's not going to call one of the teachers, she's going to call me."

By working so closely with her staff, Shipley was able to see the strengths and potential of her staff and parents. "She sees a lot of leadership potential in us because she has had the opportunity to work with us in ways separate from the classroom. She usually capitalizes on those things."

#### Influence Relationships

The key to shared decision making is relationship. The staff and parents at Valencia Park participated in the shared decision-making process through open, honest communication. The school climate supported and encouraged collaboration among all the stakeholders. This was the result of an evolutionary process that started with the structure and philosophy of the Comer program, and was nurtured by the support and guidance of the principal. The Comer program provided the system for communication and collaboration, and Shipley provided the information and the encouragement necessary to keep the system in operation. The willingness of the administration, staff, and parents to form open, honest relationships with one another resulted in a decision-making process that was multidirectional and reflected their mutual purposes.

Shared decision making is not what one individual, the principal does. Shared decision making is what the principal, staff, and parents do together. In his book, *Leadership for the Twenty-first Century*, Rost articulated a new

paradigm of leadership that shifts the notion of leadership from an individual doing leadership to one of people in relationship doing leadership. This postindustrial model of leadership is what existed at Valencia Park Elementary School.

The key is to think of leadership as a relationship. Leadership is not what one individual labeled a leader does. Leadership is what leaders and collaborators do together. Leadership is people bonding together to institute a change in a group, organization, or society. Leadership is community of believers who pursue a transformational cause. Leadership is a group of activists who want to implement a reformist agenda. Leadership is a band of leaders and collaborators who envision a better future and go after it. (Rost, 1994b, p. 6)

#### The Valencia Park Family

The staff, parents, and students created a school culture that reflected a strong sense of community. Many times during my interviews, the participants referred to the feeling as being part of a family. "The Valencia Park family is a tight family. It's a real neat staff to work with; the staff is real upbeat." The strong sense of family that existed allowed for conflict among the collaborators. The participants felt free to voice their opinions. They were empowered to get down to the business of educating children.

We're a big family, we have squabbles, but what is so wonderful about it is, that in the end we can all come together and we can talk about it and we can deal with it, and that's the good part and that's what allows us, no matter how hot it gets in the meetings--and it really does get heated--there's a comfort level. Everybody is comfortable to vent and let it go. The staff demonstrated a tolerance for an acceptable level of conflict and the members were able to work through the conflict as mature adults. The

people at the school worked very hard at working together to develop this level of comfort with one another.

We really work hard at working together as a team and I know that Diana has worked really hard at developing leadership roles so that we have been assigned more kinds of roles of leading at the school.

One of the key factors that created and maintained this strong sense of family was the notion that decisions were made in the best interest of children. Children were one of the mutual purposes that inspired the stakeholders to work together. "We are one unit working together in the best interest of children." Over time this belief became institutionalized and kept the staff focused on the needs of children. One teacher expressed the staff's commitment.

I think that what I'm amazed about is, for me to walk by the various committee meetings, and maybe it's always been like this and maybe not, they are always focused on issues. It's not a free-for-all, not a time to chit chat, they are on task. They are writing the school plan, they are designing their grading standards, they are working on portfolios. I see them as very positively working together to do various tasks. There are such hard working teachers here that you could ask them to do anything and you know, they jump right in and help.

Difficult decisions were made easier when the School Planning and Management Team stayed focused on making decisions in the best interest of children. One teacher I interviewed shared an example of one decision.

The biggest decisions usually had to do with funding and what we were going to do with people and buildings and that kind of thing. Recently we have had a lot of decisions based on budget cuts. They were very difficult decisions to make because we knew the decisions were going to affect

people's lives, people's jobs, and we really spent a long time trying to concentrate and remembering that what we are doing is what's best for kids, trying to divorce ourselves away from the fact that what we're doing is also going to affect adults. That's hard, especially when you do develop connections with people.

The strong sense of family that existed among staff members also existed between the school and the community. Parent involvement was one of the key components of the Comer model, and the school staff worked very hard to create a warm and friendly atmosphere that welcomed parents to the school.

The biggest change that I've seen is the feeling that the school is a community school--an open school now. I think the parents feel real free to come in. We've made that leap from a school where we don't welcome strangers kind of feeling, to a feeling that this is a family, friendly school where we offer a lot of services for families and adults. People feel comfortable coming on campus and coming into the school.

The Student Support Team played a major role in developing and maintaining the strong sense of family that existed between the school and the community. Once again children were the mutual purpose that brought the school staff and parents together. The reason for inviting the parents to the meeting regarding their child was not to point fingers, but was to work together in a positive way to meet the needs of the child. One teacher described the feelings of several teachers and parents I interviewed.

I think the Student Support Team has done a lot to try to very positively bring all of the resources of the school together to work for the benefit of the child. It's a very positive type of group. Everyone needs to have an opportunity to sit in on that group.

Often times the need for parental contact was due to a student's poor attendance, low achievement, or inappropriate behavior. Because of the no-fault policy, when staff members made contacts with the family it was done in a positive way.

When I made my home visits I didn't say, "Why is Johnny not in school?" Instead I would say, "We've noticed that there is a problem, Johnny's not coming to school, what can we do to help?" You always put it on that basis. You never put anybody on the defensive; you always find out because you never know what the problem is. We have a lot of foster kids here, we have a lot of families in transition. You have to be sensitive to that.

#### Trust and Respect

While meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of children was the mutual purpose that brought the staff together, and children provided the link between the staff and the community, the no-fault policy was one of the factors that enabled the stakeholders to collaborate and solve problems together.

At first it was a little bit difficult to practice the no-fault policy. The first thing you want to do when there's a problem is point the finger, and so we had to work hard on looking just for solutions not for finding fault, but I think we've really come a long way with that. It has made it less threatening for people to come to the SPMT with their problems.

The no-fault policy helped to raise the level of trust among the staff members.

The open, honest collaboration that existed at Valencia Park was due, in part, to the high level of trust and respect staff members had for each other and for the community. The strength of the relationships resulted in a

decision-making process that was inclusive and in the best interest of children.

The relationships that existed enabled collaboration to be a part of the decision-making process at Valencia Park. One example shared by a staff member described the relationship between the School Planning and Management Team and the Student Support Team.

I believe our Student Support Team sees a lot of the trends with the individual students better than our SPMT. When children are brought up before the Student Support Team, their needs and concerns, both academically and socially, we begin to see trends and numbers, and see that some of these things are repeating themselves and affecting more than one child. So maybe we ought to think about this thing schoolwide or by grade level. The Student Support Team then brings it to the SPMT team. "Look we have X number of children needing such and such thing, how can we address this issue and take care of it?" Then the SPMT will suggest strategies or consider setting up some staff development to address the issue.

One parent described the relationship behaviors he observed between the staff and Shipley while a member of the School Planning and Management Team.

I was a little uncomfortable in the beginning, you know, I was surprised the teachers were really saying what they felt. Just the fact that they can disagree and not be reprimanded or have Diana or anyone else hold that against them, I think that's the important part. It doesn't mean that they will always get what they want, but I think just being able to voice their opinion is good.

The feeling of the staff to be able to express their opinion without fear of retribution speaks highly of the trust level that existed at Valencia Park. "I

think there is a real trusting that goes on within the SPMT, everyone takes the time to listen to what other people are saying." During my observations of SPMT meetings, I observed committee members listening intently and asking questions and making comments in sensitive and caring ways. Because their opinions were valued, they felt valued as a member of the decision-making process.

The trust and respect level of the relationships provided the opportunity for consensus decision making to occur. During my interview with Paine, he described the relationship between the administrators and the teachers in this way.

There doesn't seem to be any hesitancy on the part of persons who are not in administrative positions to voice their opinion. I think that there is an atmosphere of "we're all in this together, so let's solve the problems." I don't sense any kind of feeling that administrators are at a higher level than anyone else. There just seems to be a good give and take. Of course I think that is the ideal situation, where you are presented with a problem, everybody gives their input and then you come to a consensus.

The staff and parents cooperated with each other to achieve consensus. They were also realistic in their understanding that consensus decision making did not mean that everyone necessarily agreed with the decisions that were made. One staff member described the feelings of several members of the staff.

Knowing human nature I would say that not all decisions that have been made have been accepted by 100% of the staff, but for the most part, the staff does take on the new idea that might have been presented, the philosophy that is being presented and then implementation takes place. This is a democratic type of family atmosphere where decisions are made by persons in the community and the staff through consensus as a family,

not this is my decision and you will follow it kind of thing. That does not exist here.

The ability of the staff and parents to collaborate and reach consensus on important issues was an indication that the staff and parents were truly living one of the guiding principles of the Comer School Development Program, and had a significant influence on creating the changes that Valencia Park experienced between 1988 and 1995.

The changes in student achievement, teacher turnover, school climate, and parent involvement were a result of the open, honest relationships that were developed at Valencia Park. These relationships formed a network of people whose shared sense of responsibility made a difference in the lives of children. The staff and parents were truly involved in a shared decision-making process that provided the opportunity for a new kind of leadership to emerge.

## The Results

### Changes in Teacher Turnover

Nearly everyone I spoke with at Valencia Park Elementary School talked about the teacher turnover. The turnover rate was approximately 15 to 20 teachers annually. The change in staff each year made it difficult to develop a consistent program. One administrator commented: "no matter what we did, as far as bring in state of the art curriculum and a real focused staff development program, when you have turnover of teachers like that we were always playing catch up." Respondents gave several reasons for this large turnover. One reason was the number of discipline problems. The school did not have a schoolwide discipline plan in place at the time, and as a result there were lots of student suspensions. A second reason teachers left Valencia Park was due to the location of the school. Many considered the



neighborhood to be dangerous. Due to the schools reputation for being in a tough neighborhood with tough kids, experienced teachers did not apply for positions. One former administrator commented: "Every year we would lose 14 or 15 teachers and every year we would get brand new teachers. They're terribly enthusiastic, but they were not very well trained."

A third reason given for the high teacher turnover had to do with a program designed to assist new teachers with the loans they made to help pay for their college education. Often new teachers with loans would choose to come to Valencia Park because, if they did, part of their loan would be forgiven. After teaching the required number of years in a racially diverse, low income school, many would leave for less difficult assignments. "People used the school like a stepping stone--people used this school to get somewhere else."

It was not uncommon to have 25 new teachers a year. When I first came here it was like a revolving door, and when I was a mentor, for the first three years of my mentorship, that's all I did was work with new teachers on the staff. I mean my whole mentor time was spent getting buddies for the new teachers and getting people to feel like they wanted to stay.

The first year Shipley was principal, 18 teachers left the school. There were several factors that may have had an impact on the large turnover that year. One reason may have been the early retirement package offered by the district. Others may have left because they did not want to continue working with Shipley, and still others may not have felt comfortable with the philosophical framework of the Comer program.

That was the year they had the golden handshake offer--they jumped off like they were leaving a sinking ship. And the people that stayed are the ones that are still here, and of course we have some new teachers, but

the basic core are the people that were trained from the very beginning in the Comer model and have really hung in there and have made the difference between this working and not working.

After Shipley's first year as principal, the teaching staff started to stabilize. As the school climate began to change teachers chose to stay. Teachers gradually came out of their classrooms and started interacting with one another. The school began to feel like a warm and friendly place. Over time the staff at Valencia Park Elementary School created an atmosphere that pulled people together rather than drove people away. The staff evolved into a cohesive and supportive network of people with a commitment to children.

There's something that keeps us here and I'm not quite sure what it is, you know. I love the kids, and I love the teachers that I work with and so I stay. I think that the administration probably has something to do with it, but I don't know that it is administrative. I think it's just the people that I work with here and their dedication to teaching and their dedication to kids.

#### Changes in the School Climate

During the 1988-89 school year, the Valencia Park staff started working with Yale University in an effort to implement the Comer School Development Program. Two people came from Yale to begin training the staff. The first priority was to improve the school climate.

In the beginning we knew, and we were told, to work on our school climate. There were some things we needed to do. First, we needed to look better as a school. Two, we needed to work on relationships and start getting teachers and others out of their little cubby holes, and I was one of those that hid in the classroom. I was comfortable with my 30 children. Don't bother me!

Based on the interviews, prior to 1988 the physical appearance of the school was cold and sterile. The school atmosphere was far from warm, friendly, and inviting.

When I first came here, I was, oh wow, it was like barren. The hallways didn't have pictures on bulletin boards--the things I remembered from when I went to school. A friendly face in the office, a friendly smile, I didn't see too much of that my first year here.

Dubuque started working on the physical appearance of the school when she arrived in 1985. She had murals painted and display cases mounted on the walls of the main office. One teacher recalls those early efforts: "Moving the garbage cans to the back, cleaning the grounds, repainting the buildings and covering the graffiti with colorful murals went a long way toward making the school more warm and inviting."

The initial focus for changing the school climate was to improve the physical appearance of the school, develop relationships among the staff members, and reach out to parents. Over the course of seven years the staff had made tremendous strides towards creating a sense of community. Several of the staff members spoke of the feeling as being one of family. When I asked the participants why they thought this feeling of family existed at Valencia Park, many responded by saying how much they love the kids.

I have seen such a dramatic change in the students at this school during the last seven years. And probably more than anything else, There has been lots of changes in the area of self-esteem, since probably academically the students are progressing also.... The attitude of the community towards the school has really altered over the seven years. And that has got to have an effect on the kids, that their learning, their ability to learn, and their excitement for learning has improved over the seven years.

In 1995 the school appears very alive with the children's work displayed in hallways, the parent center, and classroom bulletin boards. People greet each other with a friendly "Hello" or a "Good morning," both adults and children alike. There was a cheerful and optimistic feeling about the school. One parent described the school in the following way.

I appreciate the positive attitude that the teachers, the staff and even the students exhibit, and when I'm here I can really feel that there is a lot more positive attitude here than any other school I have visited. So something must be working. My wife has also mentioned that. There seems to be a much more positive attitude here than at the previous school my child attended.

#### Changes in Parent Involvement

One of the major components of the Comer School Development Program is parent involvement. Considering what the school climate was like at Valencia Park Elementary School prior to 1988, it is easy to understand why parents chose to stay away. One teacher expressed the parents' reluctance to visit the school in this way: "Parents didn't feel very comfortable in the beginning, because they just saw this order, this hierarchy you know, you don't do certain things, you don't go over here, you don't talk to this person over there." As the school changed and parent involvement was encouraged, some parents were hesitant to take on a larger role in their children's education. One teacher expressed the views of several other teachers.

I think there were a lot of parents who didn't really like the fact that school wasn't going to take full responsibility for being the sole keeper of their children during school hours, I had some parents really fight me on the idea of coming into the classroom and being a part of it, but I didn't let up on them and finally they realized it was a

good thing.

There has been a tremendous change in the area of parent involvement at Valencia Park Elementary School since those days. There is a full-time staff member who is responsible for inviting and encouraging parents to become actively involved in their children's school and education. Parents are invited to volunteer their time working in the parent center, affectionately called the Parent's Cozy Corner, assisting teachers in classrooms, and tutoring individual students.

When I visited the school in 1995, outside the door of the Parent's Cozy Corner was a large, colorful bulletin board. On the bulletin board was a calendar with the months activities posted, information on workshops for parents, recent parent newsletters, a variety of affirmations, and lots of pictures of parents, kids and the staff. In addition, the bulletin board featured the Parent of the Month. Inside the parent center there was always coffee available and often times donuts. There were usually at least three or four parents working on teacher projects. Each teacher had a mailbox where they left work for the parent volunteers. On one bulletin board in the room was a display of the children's work and on another bulletin board was a display of the parent's work.

The staff spent lots of time and energy finding ways to support and encourage parent participation. The parents were invited to attend staff development activities, a computer class was offered for parents, and a sewing class was being considered for the near future. Parents served on the School Planning and Management Team and the School Site Council. One parent representative on the School Planning and Management Team shared with me what the experience of serving on the governance team had meant to him.

It's a great learning experience for me. I'm learning things here, not just about the school and my child's education, but I'm learning skills that I can use in my job, so that's always nice when you do something like that. I'm finding it to be a really valuable experience serving on this team and I encourage other parents to get involved too and to do as much of this type of thing as possible, because they can make a difference. You can make a difference in the school and in your own life.

Parent involvement at Valencia Park was about creating a partnership between the school and the home. The children had the most to gain from this partnership. Over the years the bond between home and school grew and both the parents and the teachers felt more comfortable working with each other. Several staff members shared with me that they would like to see even more parent involvement. One teacher stated: "I would like to have more feedback from the community on some of these programs, because we as teachers think they are really good, but I would like to hear feedback from the parents."

### Summary of Findings

Valencia Park Elementary School moved from a top-down decision-making organization to a shared decision-making organization. The transformation of the school has been reflected in a variety of ways. Over the course of ten years, the school had become clean, warm, friendly, and very child centered. The teaching staff stabilized as teachers grew to love the school, the kids, and each other. Parents became an integral part of the school. They were in classrooms assisting teachers, tutoring students, working in the parent room, and taking classes in an effort to improve their own skills. Even though this study does not show that a relationship existed

between shared decision making and student achievement, beginning in 1992 student test scores did show a general improvement.

These changes were the result of an evolving process that started with the recognition and desire for change, were guided by the clearly defined shared decision-making process emphasized in the Comer School Development Program, and were nurtured by a principal who was direct, honest, and committed to children. Shipley believed the best way to meet the educational needs of children was to share her power and involve teachers and parents in the decision-making process. The collaborative effort of the administrators, parents, and the school personnel resulted in the creation of an open and honest culture that fostered feelings of trust and respect. The strong sense of family that existed at Valencia Park enabled the staff and parents to focus their policy-making activities on making a difference in the lives of children.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### IMPLICATIONS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM VALENCIA PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL?

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature of the shared decision-making and leadership processes that existed at Valencia Park Elementary School. In Rost's definition of leadership, there is a significant shift from one person having the authority to make a change to the requirement that many would have a part in making the decision to change. I examined the changing roles of the principal, teachers, and parents within a shared decision-making process at one school site that resulted in the opportunity to practice the new paradigm of leadership which Rost articulated.

The following sections summarize the shared decision-making and leadership processes that existed at Valencia Park Elementary School that were evident as I conducted the investigation. This summary focuses on the changes in philosophy, structure, and open, honest communications that led to leadership as a process involving "ordinary human beings forming relationships" to change a school according to their mutual purposes (Rost, 1994c, p. 6). After the summary, some conclusions about the nature of the leadership processes experienced at Valencia Park are given. Then a



discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the research follows. And finally, I conclude this chapter with suggestions for future areas of study.

### Responding to the Research Questions

The questions I asked in this study were designed to develop some insights about the shared decision-making and leadership processes that occurred at Valencia Park Elementary School. The answers to those questions are summarized in the following sections.

#### Involvement of the Stakeholders

Traditionally, teachers, parents, and classified school personnel have not participated in the management of schools. The recent wave of educational reform supports a flattening of the hierarchical structure, shifting the power for decision making out to include members of the school staff and parents. In an effort to discover to what degree the stakeholders at Valencia Park were involved in the decision-making process I asked the question: "To what extent were teachers, parents, and classified staff involved in the decision-making process?"

Three factors that had an impact on the involvement of the stakeholders were: (1) the behaviors of the principal, (2) the organizational structure, and (3) communication processes. Prior to 1985, the principals of Valencia Park were described by several participants as traditional, top-down administrators. In 1985 Dubuque was appointed principal and the way the school operated began to change. This change in principals was the first step in involving teachers, parents, and classified staff in the decision-making process at Valencia Park. Dubuque and her successors, Cansdale and Shipley, operated quite differently than their predecessors. They were more accessible to the staff, and were eager to involve others in the decision-making process. The

opportunity for dialogue started the process for the creation of a sense of collective responsibility.

During the time Dubuque and Cansdale were principals, involvement of the stakeholders in the decision-making process was in the early stages and very informal. Then in 1988, Dubuque, Cansdale, and a team of teachers heard Dr. Comer speak about the success his program was having with inner-city schools in Connecticut. The Comer School Development Program was a systems approach to school management utilizing strategies and procedures that involved all the stakeholders in the process. The emphasis was on the creation of a partnership between the school and the home. This approach to management was very different from the top-down approach that was in place at Valencia Park prior to 1988. After hearing the success stories of the Comer School Development Program, the staff enthusiastically embraced the notion of becoming a *Comer School*.

The structural components of the Comer Program--the School Planning and Management Team, School Site Council, Student Support Team, grade level teams, and the various working committees--provided the vehicles through which the leaders and collaborators participated in the decision-making process which led to the opportunity for leadership. This network of committees and teams formed the institutional structure. It provided a way for a large group of people to communicate with one another in an effort to support and promote their mutual purposes. The flow of information within the network was a critical factor in keeping the participants in the decision-making process well informed.

Communication between the teams and committees, and between home and school, was done through the dissemination of information and a consistent and timely meeting schedule. The staff and parents were kept well

informed in an effort to prepare them to effectively participate in the decision-making process. The flow of information moved in all directions by means of minutes, parent newsletters, staff bulletins, and daily announcements. The meeting schedule was set at the beginning of the school year, and remained consistent throughout the year.

The structure, the lines of communication, and the encouragement and support from the principal provided the opportunity for the school staff and parents of Valencia Park to participate in the decision-making process. All the stakeholders were involved in a process of relationships "in which the focus was on the interactions of both leaders and their collaborators instead of focusing on only the behaviors and/or traits of the leader" (Rost, 1994b, p. 10). Because the influence was multidirectional, the relationships that existed grew even more powerful reaching a point where administrators, teachers, and parents were willing and eager to listen to the viewpoints of others. In addition, they remained open to the possibility of changing their opinion based on the viewpoints of others. In other words, the leaders and collaborators were actively involved in the process.

#### Relationships and Influence

The strong sense of family that existed at Valencia Park was the result of the open, honest relationships that evolved over the course of several years. This network of relationships empowered the stakeholders to participate in the shared decision-making and leadership processes. In an effort to identify the relationship and influence behaviors of the stakeholders, I asked the following two questions: "What relationship behaviors were exhibited by the school governance team and the principal?" and "what influence behaviors were used in the shared decision-making process?"

The decision to become a *Comer School* was not an easy decision to make. The administrators and staff demonstrated courage in pursuing a model for reform that was significantly different from what they had experienced. They were aware that this decision meant that parents, teachers, and administrators would be required to develop close working relationships. In spite of the knowledge and understanding that the change would require lots of time and training and might be met with resistance; the principal and members of the staff were willing to take the risk, challenge the status quo and become a *Comer School*. This behavior eventually resulted in the institutionalization of a collaborative decision-making process.

The Comer program provided the staff and parents at Valencia Park Elementary School the opportunity to develop relationships with one another that had an impact on the changes which occurred. The structure of committees and teams provided the means for bringing people together and the guiding principles provided the focus for the relationship. Together, the structure and the guiding principles of the Comer model gave the stakeholders the necessary ingredients for defining and understanding the notion of shared decision making. They provided the opportunity for the creation of the relationships that eventually evolved at Valencia Park.

The guiding principles of the Comer program were instrumental in creating an atmosphere that was very conducive to building strong relationships between the participants. The guiding principles are: (1) the no fault policy, (2) consensus decision making, (3) collaboration, and (4) a commitment to make decisions that are in the best interest of children. These principles formulated the philosophical foundation that inspired and empowered the staff and parents to work together. These strategies for decision making were very positive and proactive. They enabled the

participants to stay focused on the decision-making process as a means for finding solutions to concerns and issues together, rather than blaming each other for problems.

Collaboration was a key factor in the success of the decision-making process at Valencia Park. The open, honest communication that existed between parents, teachers, and administrators was critical. A high level of trust and respect grew out of the honest relationships that existed. The fact that committees were able to reach consensus during the decision-making process was testimony to the level of respect and trust that participants had for one another. The level of trust and respect that evolved at Valencia Park was due in part to the strong emphasis on consensus decision making which is one of the guiding principles of the Comer model: "Decision making by consensus is a process in which every stakeholder has input and "winner-loser" feelings are avoided. Team members must convey to the speaker that they have fully listened to and respect the viewpoint of the speaker, regardless of what it is" (Comer et al, 1996, p. 59). It was also due to the belief system and the behaviors of the principal.

The involvement of the stakeholders in the decision-making process started to occur when Dubuque became principal in 1985. Her visibility and accessibility to the staff and parents provided more opportunity for two-way communications. Dubuque involved teachers in the decision-making process before the school district required it in 1990. When Cansdale became principal, he continued to expand the role of teachers. The year prior to officially becoming a Comer School, Cansdale and several staff members began the process of formulating teams and committees. In 1990 Diana Shipley became principal, the same year that full implementation of the Comer model took place. She came to Valencia Park at a very critical time

and had a tremendous influence on the shared decision-making process that was in place in 1995.

As the principal, Shipley was in a position to have an influence on every aspect of the school, and she was ultimately responsible for the effectiveness of the teaching and learning that occurred at Valencia Park. Shipley's dedication and commitment to children were a source of inner strength for her. These beliefs inspired her to set clear expectations for herself, staff, students, and parents. As principal, part of her responsibility was to hold staff members accountable for the job they performed. Shipley's strong sense of self provided her with many personal resources that influenced others, and subsequently had an influence on the shared decision-making and leadership processes at Valencia Park.

Communication was very important to Shipley. One of her personal resources she used was communicating with others in direct and honest ways. People knew where they stood with her. Because of her self-confidence and perceived image of strength, she encouraged others to discuss and debate the issues. She would, despite her options, go along with the majority even though she disagreed with the decision. She chose true consensual decision making, as she participated as an equal member of the team. A high level of trust evolved at Valencia Park, in part, because of Shipley's authenticity and credibility. Staff members and parents were empowered by her to participate in the decision-making process openly and honestly.

Shipley also influenced the change process by "using ordinary power resources" (Rost, 1994b, p. 1). She kept herself and the stakeholders well informed. She believed information was a source of knowledge, and with knowledge comes power. The stakeholders were empowered to make well informed decisions and developed the confidence to express their opinions.

Shipley expected the stakeholders to be knowledgeable regarding the school and district expectations specifically in the areas of teaching and learning. The sharing of information was multidirectional. Staff members also provided Shipley with information that they discovered in the literature or professional growth workshops they attended.

At Valencia Park School the role of the principal shifted from an individual who prescribed solutions to a facilitator who supported and guided many participants in a collaborative process that was designed to meet the changing needs of children. She did this by standing up for what she believed and speaking up for children. Shipley also truly believed that to meet the needs of the students at Valencia Park, parents and teachers must be a part of the decision-making process. Staff members and parents were inspired by her honesty and authenticity, and consequently, were empowered to participate in the change process openly and honestly. The relationships that existed at Valencia Park were based on open, honest communications that resulted in a high level of trust. "Only after a period of time in which trust, and subsequently respect, are established can school professionals feel relatively secure in fully exploring collaborative relationships" (Friend & Cook, 1992, p. 9). The network of honest relationships created the sense of family, an appellation that many interviewed used to characterize the relationships among staff members. The result was the opportunity to use a new paradigm of leadership.

#### The Changes That Were Made

The changes that occurred at Valencia Park were the result of a collaborative effort. I asked two questions about the changes: "What changes did the governance team intend to make regarding teaching and learning and what changes have been implemented?" and "Were the changes mutually

agreeable to the people in the relationship?" The purpose of the shared decision-making process at Valencia Park was to systematically structure and coordinate activities in an effort to improve the academic program and the social climate of the school. The stakeholders were empowered to make decisions ranging from fund raising to curriculum and budget issues. Due to limited space in the cafeteria, there is need for a covered area outside for children to eat their lunch. Through shared governance, the staff and parents worked together over a period of time to generate ideas to raise funds for this project. In the area of curriculum and program development, stakeholders designed a schoolwide reading program designed to raise the reading levels of all students. In the area of budget, the participants reached consensus on the need to let go of eleven aides in an effort to meet the demands of a budget cut. These specific examples demonstrate some of the changes that resulted from the shared decision-making process at Valencia Park. Meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of all children was the school's primary purpose for existing and the motivation and inspiration behind the collaborative efforts of the stakeholders.

In addition, there were significant changes in teacher turnover, school climate, and parent involvement. During the years between 1985 and 1990, the turnover rate of teachers was approximately 15 to 20 annually. During the 1995-96 school year two teachers left Valencia Park, both because the teachers moved out of the San Diego area. Soon after the school started to implement the structure and philosophy of the Comer program, the school climate began to change and teachers chose to stay. Teachers gradually came out of their classrooms and started interacting with one another. The school began to feel like a warm and friendly place. Over time the staff created an atmosphere that drew people together rather than drove them away. The staff and



parents evolved into a cohesive and supportive network of people with a commitment to children.

The 1989-90 school year was the planning year for Valencia Park to prepare and begin the training necessary to become a *Comer School*. During that year, visitors from the Comer Development Center informed the staff and parents of Valencia Park that their first priority should be to improve the school climate. Dubuque started changing the physical appearance of the school by having murals painted on the walls. From that time on there was a consistent effort on the part of all the stakeholders to paint, clean and improve the overall appearance of the school. This collective sense of responsibility contributed to the strong feeling of family that existed at Valencia Park in 1995. The staff and parents transformed the school from a drab and cold building to a warm and friendly place. By 1995 the school was alive with the children's work displayed in hallways, the parent center, and bulletin boards. There is a cheerful and optimistic feeling about the school. Parents and visitors are greeted with a friendly "Hello" or a "Good morning." This was quite a contrast from the earlier times when parents did not feel welcomed at the school.

One of the major components of the Comer School Development Program is parent involvement. Prior to the changes in school climate, parents did not feel comfortable coming to school. Soon after becoming a *Comer School*, Shipley hired a community liaison. Her responsibilities included setting up a parent center and planning activities that supported and encouraged parent involvement. In recent years the school has offered computer, math, and reading classes to parents. Between 1990 and 1995 the number of parent volunteer hours grew to 7,000 a year. Parents volunteered hours assisting teachers in classrooms, working in the parent center, tutoring children, and

supervising students during lunch. In addition, parents participated on the School Site Council and the School Planning and Management Team. By 1995 a strong partnership had evolved between the school and the home. This partnership between the school and home strengthened and expanded the sense of family that evolved at Valencia Park.

The common bond for this partnership formed from concern for the children. The expectation that decisions would be made in the best interest of children was a unifying goal that inspired leaders and collaborators to work together in the spirit of communitarianism. "The changes must not only reflect what the leaders want but what the collaborators want" (Rost, 1994c, p. 8). Together the school staff and parents developed institutional structures that promoted and protected the needs of children. They bonded together with a focus on commitment and obligation to meet the changing needs of their students. This was their mutual purpose. "The emphasis in bonding is on relationships characterized by mutual caring and the felt interdependence that comes from mutually held obligations and commitments" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 193). The results of this shared sense of responsibility were the changes in school climate, parent involvement, and teacher turnover. Changes of this nature seems to have had an impact on student achievement.

Rost suggested one of the skills needed for postindustrial leadership is "advocating for the commons" (1994b, p. 1). The shared decision-making process that was in place at Valencia Park advocated for the commons and provided the chance for leadership. "Once a community of mind emerges, it becomes a substitute for leadership. The school becomes a place where people care for each other, help each other, devote themselves to their work, and commit themselves to inquiry and learning" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 198). The participants who entered into this leadership dynamic at Valencia Park

believed that the results of their collaboration were likely to be more powerful and significant than the results of their individual efforts. The transformation of Valencia Park was the product of their collaboration.

#### Leadership at Valencia Park Elementary School

The changes that occurred at Valencia Park between 1988 and 1995 illustrate how Rost's definition of leadership works in practice. The shared decision-making process that was institutionalized at Valencia Park enabled a large group of people to work collaboratively together in an effort to bring about change. Rost (1993) insisted that there were four elements to his definition of leadership.

1. Both leaders and collaborators are involved in the relationship. The Comer Development Program adopted at Valencia Park Elementary School required that decision making at the school site include teachers and parents. Leadership at Valencia Park was not what the principal did, but a collaborative effort of all the stakeholders. The staff and parents were an essential component of the relationship. At the SPMT and grade level team meetings I observed, most members were not passive participants. They were discussing, debating, supporting, or opposing the proposal or issue at hand. Principals must believe in, and trust, that their staff and parents have valuable contributions to make to the decision-making process. The changing roles of administrators, teachers, and parents need to be clearly defined. For obvious reasons, it would be advantageous if district personnel and the school board modeled collaboration in their process of decision making.

2. They used only noncoercive influence strategies in that relationship. At Valencia Park the network of relationships that existed were often referred to as a family. So it was not surprising to observe and discover influence

behaviors that were noncoercive. Participants in the decision-making and leadership processes communicated openly and honestly. The result was that a high level of trust and respect existed among the stakeholders. By modeling open communication and honesty, the principal empowered others to participate openly and honestly in the leadership relationship. In addition, the role of the principal shifted from "prescribing substance to facilitating processes" (Reitzug, 1994, p. 304). The principal's role was to guide and nurture the process. Noncoercive influence was also reflected in the behaviors of knowledgeable decision makers. Leaders and collaborators assumed responsibility to share their expertise or information that contributed to the knowledge base of the school community.

3. They intended real changes. Leadership is about change, and at Valencia Park this meant administrators, teachers, other staff members, and parents, working together to decide what changes they wanted to make to meet the needs of children. A core of administrators and teachers recognized a need for change and were willing and eager to take on the challenge to change. The school made a paradigm shift from a top-down decision-making process to a shared decision-making process. The critical factors that influenced a change of this magnitude were: (a) knowledge that long lasting change must start with the self, with personal beliefs and attitudes; (b) understanding that change of any significance takes time and training; and (c) monitoring that is consistent and developmental.

4. They made sure that the changes reflected the mutual purposes of both the leaders and the collaborators. At Valencia Park Elementary School the children were the center of the decision-making process. In the beginning, leaders and collaborators needed to remind each other that decisions should be made that were in the best interest of children. For example, issues or

concerns that were brought to the governance structure may have required changes in program offerings, teaching and learning strategies, the distribution of funds, or a change in personnel. Whatever the issue or concern, the focus was on how the decision might impact the children. The mutual purposes that leaders and collaborators developed at Valencia Park were centered around children. The no-fault policy provided the motivation and inspiration to focus on making important changes rather than wasting away precious time blaming someone for the need to change.

#### Future Research Directions

As a result of this study I discovered several areas that are deserving of greater attention. This study presented the transformation of one school that the people involved experienced during a ten year period. The Comer Development Program provided Valencia Park with a definition, a philosophical foundation, and a structure for their shared decision-making process. What other programs exist and are being utilized by schools? What are the similarities and differences between the programs? How significant is the role of the principal in each of these programs? Research must be done on a number of schools so that scholars and practitioners can generalize on the common experience of leadership in these schools.

Defining the scope of authority is another area of the shared decision-making process that needs further research. Schools are very complex organizations. Decisions ranging from the day-to-day management of the school plant to personnel and budget issues that affect teaching and learning, need to be made on a daily basis. Which decisions will have the greatest impact on student improvement? Of those decisions, are there any that the principal should make alone, or should the teachers and parents be involved in all decisions that could have an impact on student learning? By defining

the scope of authority, the changing roles of administrators, teachers, and parents become much clearer. Are the opportunities for leadership greater when the stakeholders are clear about their roles in the decision-making process? There is a need to examine the kinds of decisions that are made at the school level, the impact of those decisions on student achievement, and the role of the principal, teachers, and parents in the decision-making process. This is important to the study of educational reform because understanding the roles of the stakeholders is a critical aspect of shared decision making. It is also important to the study of leadership because participation by the stakeholders is a crucial part of that process.

The results of this study reflect that significant changes took place at Valencia Park between 1988 and 1995. As indicated, the changes were due, in part, to the change in attitude and behavior of the administrators, staff, and parents. A change of any significance starts with a shift in beliefs and attitudes within the individuals participating in the change. I only touched casually on the affirmation program and its impact on the attitudes and behaviors of staff and parents. Also, how much influence did the no-fault policy have on the changes that took place? Both the affirmation program and the no-fault policy are very positive and proactive strategies for decision making and for living one's life. Did these approaches have an influence on teachers choosing to stay or leave Valencia Park? How much influence, if any, does a positive and proactive philosophy have on the leadership process as defined in this study? There is a need to examine the impact that attitudes and behaviors of the participants have on the change process. This is important for the study of educational reform and the study of leadership because change is crucial for both processes.

The influence the principal can have in facilitating a change is an area that needs further study. In this study I emphasized the magnitude of the change involved when a school shifts from a top-down decision-making process to a collaborative process. I believe the principal's role is critical in the initial phases of the change and continues to be important in enabling the process to function effectively. The challenge for the principal is "to maximize the likelihood that decisions will be appropriately participatory, informed, and sensitive to the content" (David, 1995, p. 7). Further research needs to be done on a number of principals that are empowering others to participate in a shared decision-making process so scholars and practitioners can generalize on the impact the principal has on the shared decision-making process.

This study raises many issues that need further study in order to better understand and appreciate the impact shared decision making can have on educational reform. It was clear to me during the review of literature that there is no common understanding of what shared decision making is and how it can best be utilized by schools. While this study did provide some insights into the use of shared decision making as a way to provide opportunities for leadership, future investigations are needed to uncover how leadership can be practiced by both leaders and collaborators.

#### Reflections on the Research Process

Limiting this study to one case was a strength of this investigation. By concentrating my time and energy on the changes that occurred at one school, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of what may have influenced these changes. The transformation of Valencia Park involved people creating open and honest relationships with one another. The complexities of both human nature and change supported the need for a single case study. By limiting this study to a single case, I also discovered that the process of shared

decisions should not be isolated to one committee or team within a school. The governance of a school must be perceived holistically. The committees and teams that operated throughout the school were interconnected and formed the network, and the network was the shared decision-making process.

I found that even though I had limited my study to one school, the broad scope of the research limited me from probing deeper into the complex nature of change. If I were to do a follow-up study, I would examine in greater detail the process of change in beliefs and attitudes that the stakeholders at Valencia Park experienced while their roles were changing significantly.

### Conclusion

The call to reform education is getting louder and louder. At a recent American Association of School Administrators conference, Secretary of Education Richard Riley said: "Job security secured by hard work is no longer assured. More than ever, people are looking to education as the solution. Polls show that a first-class education is the number 1 issue for Americans" (Jahn, 1996, p. B-3). The staff and parents of Valencia Park Elementary School understood that meeting the needs of children today and preparing them for the 21st century would require them to work together as a community of change agents.

It is time to build influence relationships that are collaborative and noncoercive, relationships that build shared commitment through persuasive strategies and interactive growth and development. It is time for us to work on the common good together, building collective vision of a responsible future that we are proud to leave to the generations to come. (Rost, 1994a, p. 11)



Such an undertaking calls for a revolution rather than a reform. Making the move from an industrial model of leadership to a postindustrial model must be recognized as a paradigm shift. In the case of a school, for example, to make the shift from the principal doing leadership to the principal, parents, and teachers doing leadership, required significant changes in a variety of areas. Some of those areas are: (1) beliefs and attitudes, (2) policies and procedures, (3) group dynamics, and (4) community involvement.

Traditionally speaking, school personnel and parents are not accustomed to working together. They need training in collaboration, consensus decision making, and conflict resolution. In addition, they need to have access to school and district policies, procedures, and budgets in order to make well informed decisions. Professional growth opportunities should be made available to teachers on an on-going basis in an effort to keep them apprised of current research in the area of curriculum, and teaching and learning strategies. This training will require time. Schools need to provide adequate time for planning and meeting.

The principal played a key role in the success of the shared decision-making and leadership processes that existed at Valencia Park. It is important that school districts are sensitive to the critical role that principals play in empowering the stakeholders to participate openly and honestly in the decision-making process. If the principal does not believe in participatory decision making, it more than likely will not occur. For collaboration to be truly effective, communication between the stakeholders must be direct, open and honest. The principal should model and nurture this type of dialogue. The behaviors of the principal can empower others to participate in an authentic manner. Relationships built on trust and respect will grow out this quality of communication.

Trust and respect do not automatically accompany a staff's gaining a representational voice or a vote on decision-making bodies. Beyond having a voice and a vote, school staff need a milieu of trust and respect in which to work. Trust building is an active process that does not occur without effort. (Cross & Reitzug, 1996, p. 18)

If school district administrators *truly* want stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process, they need to select principals who believe in the process and are willing to share their power and authority. Many voices participating in the decision making will have a greater impact on the education of children than one voice.

It is important to remember that schools exist for children and their families. It is easy to lose site of that fact when things are not going well and/or the staff is unhappy. At Valencia Park Elementary School the staff and parents were consistently reminded that decisions should be made in the best interest of children. Providing children the best education possible was the common bond that strengthened and empowered the relationships among the adults at the school and between the school and the home. At Valencia Park, a strong sense of family eventually evolved. When a spirit of community exists in an organization, a collective sense of responsibility exists as well. Participants in this type of relationship can have a tremendous influence on one another. This brings me to Rost's definition of leadership: "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and their collaborators who intend real change that reflects their mutual purposes" (1991, p. 102).

Leadership as a practice is what this dissertation is all about. At Valencia Park, the staff and parents created the opportunity to practice leadership. They had a well defined process for sharing the decision making with all the

key stakeholders; teachers, parents, and administrators. They had a principal who genuinely believed in the process and subsequently empowered others to participate. And, together the participants built relationships of trust and respect. The school became "a place where people cared for each other, helped each other, devoted themselves to their work, and committed themselves to inquiry and learning" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 198). Such involvement is not just restricted to schools. Any organization can experience such a process.

If an organization is viewed as a pattern of relationships among the people involved then leadership is done by the people in the relationship as they influence one another to bring about change that reflects their mutual purposes. The experience of doing leadership can produce a sense of ownership in the organization and deepen a person's commitment to it. (Bray, 1994, p. 387)

The participants who choose to *practice* leadership, do so because they believe that the results of their collaboration are likely to be more powerful and significant than the results of their individual efforts. This new paradigm of leadership has tremendous implications for meeting the challenges our world, our country, our society, and our schools face today and will face in the 21st century. Meeting these challenges as a community with a collective sense of responsibility is a very positive and optimistic approach to finding solutions and meeting the needs of a changing world. So much of what we are exposed to through the media is doom and gloom news about the condition of our world, country, and society. The postindustrial paradigm of leadership such as we see in the Comer Model offers a solution, that if put into *practice*, could renew and elevate the spirit of a nation.

It is time to build sustainable relationships that develop common purposes. It is time to build influence relationships that are collaborative

and noncoercive, relationships that build shared commitment through persuasive strategies and interactive growth and development. It is time for us to work on the common good together, building a collective vision of a responsible future that we are proud to leave to the generations to come. (Rost, 1994a, p. 11)

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## APPENDIX A

## Consent Form - Participant

Julie Martel is a doctoral candidate at the University of San Diego and she has asked me to be a participant in her research study. She will examine the shared decision-making and leadership processes that exist at my school through observations, interviews, and the examination of district and school documents. The following is an agreement for the protection of my rights in this study.

1. I understand that the interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. I agree to participate in an interview process that will last forty-five to sixty minutes. I will receive a copy of the interview transcript to review, amend, or delete any statement I wish.
2. If any quotations from my reviewed interview are used in the research document, I have the right to anonymity.
3. I understand the transcript of my interview will be kept confidential. The tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of Martel's research.
4. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without risk of penalty.
5. Little risk or discomfort is expected as a result of participating in this study.
6. If I have questions regarding this study, I can contact Julie Martel at 582-8990.

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation and, on that basis, I give consent to my voluntary participation in this research.

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Signature of Subject

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Date

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Signature of Researcher

-----  
Date

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Location

## APPENDIX B

## Consent Form - Participant Who Will Be Identified by Position

Julie Martel is a doctoral candidate at the University of San Diego and she has asked me to be a participant in her research study. She will examine the shared decision-making and leadership processes that exist at my school through observations, interviews, and the examination of district and school documents. The following is an agreement for the protection of my rights in this study.

1. I understand that the interview will be audio taped and transcribed verbatim. I agree to participate in several interviews each of which will last an hour. I will receive a copy of the interview transcript to review, amend, or delete any statement I wish.
2. If any quotes from my reviewed interview are used in any part of the study, I give my permission to attribute those to me in my position since it would be impossible to keep most of those statements confidential.
3. I understand the transcript of my interview will be kept confidential. The tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of Martel's research.
4. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without risk of penalty.
5. Little risk or discomfort is expected as a result of participating in this study.
6. If I have questions regarding this study, I can contact Julie Martel at 582-8990.

I, the undersigned, understand the above explanation and, on that basis, I give consent to my voluntary participation in this research.

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Signature of Subject

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Date

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Signature of Researcher

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Date

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Location