

**A LATINA LEADER'S CONSEJO: GET TO KNOW YOUR PEOPLE AND
GET THEM ON THE PATH OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The author explains, in detail, strategies used in her experience to develop a shared vision, with every group she led, to serve as their guide for all improvement efforts. These are strategies that she used throughout her leadership experience. The first strategy helps the leader know the school and the community partners. The second strategy is designed to clearly define a compelling future of excellence for the organization. The Theory of Action is simple: Once every single member of the school community shares in this vision and sees themselves as a contributing member, they find purpose in the endeavor. This shared vision becomes a call to action and the commitments they bring to the school are materialized. The mandates become an opportunity for change and a shift from a "Compliance to a Commitment" mindset begins. Through her Testimonio, the author will help readers understand the importance of developing a clear road map that can be revisited multiple times to keep the teams focused on top priorities for all students. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of using social capital and the will of the team members to activate a vision in any educational setting ensuring an equitable approach to begin the journey of continuous improvement (Bryk et al., 2017).

Keywords: school vision, continuous improvement, data driven decision making, school improvement plans, administration preparation program, collective efficacy, adult learning theory, storytelling

This article is about the testimonio of one Latina school leader and her experiences developing a clear and shared school vision with the people closest to its enactment. This Latina relied on her own cultural background to engage the people in her charge to imagine a compelling future for the organization that would guide their efforts.

Currently, all school sites must have a vision included in required documents, such as the site plan, the state's report card, and even to follow California's standards for administrators used for their evaluation. As a matter of equity, the vision serves as the guiding destination for every student at the school site or the institution. In the last four years, the author has been a professor in an administration preparation program, and very few students can recite their school's vision, or identify its location.

This paper has been divided into four main sections: First, the purpose and significance of this paper are explained. Second, a literature review is provided to highlight the work of experts in the field of education that supported the decision-making throughout the experience. Third, the narrative begins with the journey of building relationships and getting to know the community. It ends with the co-creation of a clear destination or vision, operationalizing it, and utilizing it to begin the conversation on goal setting and an action plan. Finally, a conclusion and a set of recommendations are provided to help other leaders replicate the strategies taught.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of activating a shared vision in any educational setting to ensure equity and begin the journey of continuous improvement (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019). This article uses Testimonio and Storytelling as the methodology to describe my lived experience so it can "be used to recast and challenge pervasive theories, policies, and explanations about educational failure as a problem, not of individuals but of systemic institutionalized practices of oppression" (Reyes & Curry, 2012, p. 527). As a Latina leader, I was able to entrust the individuals of the school community to develop a shared vision that disrupted the persistent failure of certain groups. They also became empowered and ready to take on this challenge. My testimonio helps the reader understand how to replicate this and create a common vision that will begin the conversation on "what could be" and propel the journey to improve student outcomes. As a Latina leader with over 20 years of experience as a K-12 administrator, I worked with several groups in a variety of educational contexts, and I was successful at changing persistent equity gaps. As an immigrant and a second language learner, I needed to find a strategic way to bring to fruition a shared vision that clearly defined the school, district, or department's destination. A compelling future that could be created by the collective effort that would not appear like a demand on the practitioners, but more like a call to action for all those involved. This shared vision would also serve as a clear guide to do the work necessary to start closing equity gaps and engage in a continuous improvement process (CDE, 2019). This strategy is based on my lived experience and research. The literature review is based on research specific to school improvement and developing a school plan.

In this article, my testimonio will provide a strategy, a sequential action plan that has been developed through years of experience at various levels of administration in my career. The storytelling aspect of Testimonio is the qualitative methodology used in this article. It is rooted in oral cultures and in Latin American social struggles. According to Bernal et al. (2012) “within the field of education, scholars are increasingly taking up *testimonio* as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia” (p. 363).

Storytelling is central to learning new concepts and to develop understanding in Latinx cultures (Torres et al., 2017). *Déjame que te cuente Limeña* is a popular phrase in a song and in Lima, Peru where I grew up. Storytelling has been central to my success as a Latina leader when discussing difficult topics of inequities, doing the right thing for all students, and empowering those closest to the issue to do something about it.

Research Questions

What personal skills can a Latina leader use to drive change in a school? How will she develop trust?

What will she be held accountable for?

How can a vision of a school serve as a clear and equitable destination for all constituents?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides the primacy to the strategies that are used in this article and the co-development of the school vision. According to state and federal standards, all school sites must have a vision that is included in required documents, such as the site plan, the state's report card, and it is even stated on the evaluation of administrators (National Policy Board for Educational Leaders [NPBEA], 2015). As a matter of equity, the vision serves as the guiding destination for every student at the school site or the institution. For the last four years, I have been a *doctora*, a tenure-track professor in an administration preparation program. Through this experience, I have witnessed very few students recite their school's vision or identify its location.

The California Professional Standards for Education Leaders, (CPSELS, 2014) is a document that was approved by the California Commission on Teaching Credentialing (CCTC) department. The CPSELS (CCTC, 2014) serve as a guide to all public education leaders in California. Their development was influenced by the following specific document, *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* (Marzano et al., 2005). The standards were drafted in collaboration by several leading educational organizations in California and based on the National Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (Council of Chief State school Officers [CCSSO], 1996). There are six standards, and it is important to highlight the first standard, Standard 1 which states, “Development and implementation of a shared vision. Education leaders facilitate the development and implementation of a shared vision of learning and growth of all students” (p.4). It also has three elements that highlight the important components of this standard,

- Element 1A: Leaders shape a collective vision that uses multiple measures of data and focuses on equitable access, opportunities, and outcomes for all students.
- Element 1B: Developing Shared Vision: Leaders engage others in a collaborative process to develop a vision of teaching and learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.
- Element 1C: Vision Planning and Implementation: Leaders guide and monitor decisions, actions, and outcomes using the shared vision and goals (p. 4).

The first element is about drafting a vision, the second is about engaging others on the vision, and the third element is about using this vision and the goals as a guide for improvement. Moreover, these elements require that this vision takes into consideration an analysis of the data and a collective action towards closing any achievement gaps. At the national level, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NPBEA, 2015) were revised in 2015 and the first standard states: “Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student” (p. 9). This reaffirms the importance of leaders developing a vision that will guide all decisions in a school to provide a high-quality education for students.

In my experience as an administrator, there seems to be a disconnect between data chats and a shared vision that clearly and collectively defines the commitment that all community and school partners should embody for equity to be at the center of all decisions. Some researchers have touted the idea that developing a vision statement is a waste of time (Rozycki, 2004). That is, if the statement is vague and never used to drive the goals. In this article, the development of a vision entails creating a list of evidentiary behaviors that will serve as a guide for all practitioners in that school. A set of commitments based on data in a coherent plan. Usually, district accountability meetings look like this: a mandatory district wide meeting for all administrators to learn about the state results of the district. Today, districts deliver results from the California School Dashboard (2023), which uses a growth model approach and provides a public website that can be accessed by all constituents. In my experience, the district data is shared in the morning of one of the first days of the school year. In the afternoon, administrators go back to their sites to discuss their own results. It seems that the purpose of these meetings is to highlight areas of success and areas of improvement. So, in practice, accountability, data, and the vision are not connected. Data and accountability are connected quantitatively, but the vision seems to be isolated and not used to drive any improvement efforts. Without a common resolve and a commitment that goes beyond numbers, this meeting will be dreaded by most, unless the results are glorious.

Finally, research on cultural values and traits in the Latinx culture that influence my actions is also researched and compared to my lived experience. Developing trust, *confianza*, with the people in my charge, has a very different connotation than the Eurocentric approach to trust building being good for business (Covey, 2006). I used skills and values that were central to my personal beliefs, like *simpatía*, *familismo*, *respeto*, y *honor*. Finally, *mi palabra es impecable*.

Accountability in Education

The literature review revealed that there is personal accountability for an administrator via the standards (NPBEA, 2015) and school accountability via the school plans that are submitted (CDE, 2019). If we follow the order of the standards and the school plans, the vision of a school or district is the first step in any change effort. As explained in the standards for administrators, the development of a shared vision is critical to the action plan that is implemented to support all students in learning (CPSELS, 2014). All districts and schools in California are familiar with the word accountability. Through the years, there have been different accountability requirements with specific quantitative expectations like the Academic Yearly Progress and the Academic Performance Index brought to us by the No Child Left Behind Act in 1999. Today, we have a growth model that starts with the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) and its measurement, the California School Dashboard, which compares the growth of a site or district in two years. In the last few years, accountability has shifted from a punitive approach to a more supportive approach. This shift was signaled by the establishment of the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence (CCEE) in 2013 to provide advice and assistance to districts. It clearly states on their website that they are “charged with assisting LEAs in need of support, CCEE provides universal, targeted, and intensive supports and resources for local educational agencies (California Educational Code [CEC] Section 52074, 2013). In my opinion, the feeling of being held accountable by punitive means or by supportive means, is the same during that first data review meeting.

Along with the required LCAP or other plans in California, all public schools are required to report their progress by completing and publishing a School Accountability Report Card (SARC), (CDE, 2023). The document requires schools to provide a “Description and Mission Statement (School Year 2022–23). Use this space to provide information about the school, its program, and its goals (p.1).” There is no mention of the school mission in the instructions and no mention of a vision. Another document that must be submitted by every public school in California is the School Plan for Student Achievement (SPSA). Although it requires schools to develop a plan that meets ESSA requirements, this plan must include a needs-assessments and the development of goals and strategies. There is no mention of a school vision. This gap creates confusion. On one hand, administrators have the duty to develop a shared vision to drive continuous improvement as the standards state. On the other, all forms and plans required by the state and federal government, skip this part and require the development of goals and strategies. As a Latina leader, I faced this dilemma. Therefore, I sought other sources of guidance. I poured over research available to me related to school accountability and improvement.

The literature review related to accountability for educational leaders is clear. Educational leaders are held by standards that require them to establish a shared vision based on data, that should be used to guide improvement efforts. State and federal accountability forms do not require a vision. They require goals and action. There is little literature that explains how to develop a shared vision in an accountability driven context. As a Latina leader, I searched for literature that would help me identify the best ways to implement a vision that would be shared, based on data,

that would also be actionable. The research I found was related to effective schools, best teaching practices, best adult learning practices, and distributed leadership. Most of the authors did not look like me or shared similar backgrounds or challenges. In addition, they did not suggest the best ways to create a shared vision. Nevertheless, to imagine what a compelling future in a school like mine would look like, I needed to understand best practices in this context and what teachers would be doing. Following are some highlights of this research.

Effective School Practices

New administrators depend on blending theory and practice, understanding how to help their teachers, and understanding equity gaps to lead their sites successfully (Westberry & Hornor, 2022). These books become a needed resource for administrators. Two authors that specialize in school improvement are Dr. Fullan and Dr. Reeves.

Michael Fullan (1992, 2002, 2003, 2008) argues that principals are better off spending time creating collaborative cultures rather than spending time creating a vision. Fullan (2003) discusses how principals need to be change agents that influence the school and the individual teachers, thus changing the context of the school. The implication is that if a school is not performing, this can be influenced by the principal by creating a few goals that are clear and attainable. Later in his research, Fullan (2014) discusses how principals need to have a clear moral purpose to do what is best for students and that creating coherence is most important.

Doug Reeves is the author of the *90-90-90 Schools* research. He studied the common characteristics of schools that were 90% successful, 90% ethnically diverse, and 90% of their students lived in poverty. Reeves (2004), suggests that two important concepts for success are to have student-centered accountability and to look at teaching practices. He further states, "...the research is clear that variables in teaching, curriculum, and leadership are profoundly important. In fact, these variables—which teachers and leaders can control—have more influence over student achievement than the intractable variables of poverty, culture, and language" (p. 79).

These assertions keep the focus on leaders and teachers, who are at the core of student success. Dr. Reeves (2011) suggests that a vision without implementation is a waste of time. He adds that people take too long trying to craft the perfect vision statement and action takes a second seat.

These two researchers resonated with me. I also have a moral purpose and I work in areas that are ethnically diverse and poverty stricken. I believe that continuous improvement is necessary, and the focus should be on leaders and teachers. Together we could design a compelling future well defined by a shared vision. Furthermore, it could serve as a great impetus for achieving our moral purpose and coherence. We could serve as change agents if a vision is operationalized from the beginning and becomes a set of agreements that leads to coherence and an action plan.

Effective Teaching Practices

There are many authors that have focused their research on best teaching practices. Doug Fisher & Nancy Frey (2008, 2021) provide many strategies focused on best practices for English

Learners as well as student centered practices. For example, they expanded the Gradual Release of Responsibility (2012) and added student collaborative practices where they would practice new target academic language. They created time for Structured Language Practice, which also served to help English Learners develop new language in English. Considering quantitative meta-analysis of best practices, John Hattie (2009) and Tomas Marzano (2001, 2005, 2009) had important findings that reaffirmed the school effectiveness research. Hattie (2009) argues that his meta-study finds the power of Collective Teacher Efficacy as having the highest positive impact on student learning. Tomas Marzano (2001, 2005, 2009) went a step further and linked Effective Schools Research and Teacher Effectiveness where he identified that effective teachers who work in effective schools actually have the highest student outcomes.

These authors provided the affirmation that teachers that work in collaboration and are focused on student outcomes will have the most impact on positive outcomes for students. In addition, all efforts should be student centered.

Distributed Leadership

This research suggests that schools need to help their teachers collaborate with their peers and administration. This is what will help everyone learn from each other and improve the school system together. Here are three sources.

Richard Elmore (2000) brings up the idea that school leaders cannot be solely responsible for school reform. In this new era of standards, teachers are the ones to implement them. Leaders need to be aware of their context, their community, and their teachers. He states that shared leadership is the only way leaders will accomplish their goals. Elmore (2009) also suggested the practice of Instructional Rounds and compares them to those in the medical field. To understand where learning occurs, we must look at our current teaching practices and do it collaboratively with teachers to identify how to improve student learning. He suggests that if we want to learn about student learning, we need to look at the cause, which is teaching. These observation-discussion-analysis practices should be shared as they take place, so there is a higher understanding on what strategies are the most successful. He calls improvement “a change with direction” (p. 13) which implies that all changes should be working towards the same vision of success.

Rick Dufour (2004) was an expert in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). He discussed multiple components of an effective PLC. Most importantly, the main focus of a PLC is to engage in collective inquiry to explore student learning and the best practices that would result in the best student outcomes.

Matthew C. Militello (2009) established the use of a Cycle of Inquiry to help principals improve teaching and learning. His book, *Leading with Inquiry and Action* discusses how to use the Collaborative Inquiry Action Cycle at the site level or at the grade level. It is a tool that helps leaders engage in cycles of action and evaluation to identify issues in practice.

The prior three references on distributed leadership have a clear alignment to andragogy, adult learning theory. If teachers work collectively on relevant topics, such as their own teaching practices and their students, they will more likely be engaged. If they operate as problem solvers

in their own practice, they will also be empowered to do more. Malcom Knowles' theory, included in his book, *The Adult Learners* (2020) describes adult learner theory as transformative, in which adults engage as agents in their own practice by following these principles: a self-directed, experiential, and problem-centered approach to learning.

Two other strategies that are related to adult learning and have a direct impact on vision development are: identifying micropolitics in a school and how to translate values into operational principles. The idea of understanding micropolitics in a school (Malen, 1994) suggests that leaders need to understand the power relations that exist in schools. Principals need to know and recognize those who make the decisions in that school, the de facto leaders. This is important information when you are learning the lay of the land before the vision is developed. The second strategy is called *Totems, Taboos, and Repetitive Interactions* (Zuieback, 2013). Zuieback suggests that values can be translated into principles by asking people about the behaviors that would be congruent with their values (repetitive interactions), the behaviors that would violate these values (taboos), and the quantifiable measures they could achieve (totems.) This strategy was adapted with the purpose of translating a compelling future into tangible commitments.

Latina Leadership: Mis Valores y Talentos

Culture is a very complex concept and there has been extensive research in the comparison of individualistic cultures and collectivist cultures in many dimensions (Fatehi, K. et al., 2020). Cultural values among collectivist cultures center on the benefit of the family and community (Hui, C. H. & Triandis, H. C., 1986). I grew up in Lima, Peru and our cultural values are congruent to those of a collectivist culture. Nevertheless, immigrating to the United States as a young wife, married to an American Anglo-Saxon, and having three children before going into education, brings its own unique perspectives. My values are my own. I believe in bilingualism, multiculturalism, collaboration, social justice, integrity, and always doing my best. As a leader, I had the challenge of working with people I did not know but felt responsible for them and their wellbeing. I believed that students needed to be treated as I would want my children to be treated. Finally, I was unapologetic when it came to students' rights. Juana Bordas (2001) suggests that there are three common values that permeate the Latino culture. They are *Confianza*, *Respeto*, and *Simpatía*. *Confianza* or inspiring trust is a key concept that we take seriously that is aligned to caring for others and having the best intentions for them. In addition, the concept of *mi palabra es impecable*, is very important. You can trust what I say because my word is law. Being respectful also comes with being humble. I learned at a very young age the concept of *respetos guardan respetos* and is central to my core values. I must initiate these respectful interactions. Finally, being polite and non-confrontational is very important and not easy sometimes. Being an administrator requires you to confront some injustices but it is our approach that makes a difference. Being completely direct and straightforward in a difficult conversation is not that easy for me.

Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature review starts with a deeper look at accountability systems for administrators. A gap is found when comparing accountability for individual leaders in education and their required accountability tasks. To meet their evaluation standards, educational leaders must develop and sustain a shared vision at their sites (NPBEA, 2015; CPSELS, 2014). This vision must be based on data, take into account core values, be student centered, and share an understanding within the school and the community. When accountability at the site level is explored, there is no mention of a site vision. The focus is on goals, strategies, and measurements (CDE, 2023). Leaders then must find the way to do both. They must understand their context, their students' needs, and the accountability systems that they are evaluated by. They must use their own knowledge, their strengths, and how to organize and lead the adults in their organization.

As a Latina leader, the research that focuses on distributed leadership aligns well to my belief systems. Coming from a collectivist culture, being the oldest daughter in a family of 6, and being the mother of three before working in the field of education, gave me a unique perspective. The values related to *familismo* and *simpatia* are part of the building blocks of my self-actualization as a Latina leader (Ortiz, 2020). Collaboration is required for success, for innovation, and for progress. Collaboration is tied to familismo in which the school is a family and we will transform together. We will reach our goals together. In addition, social justice and equity are also at the core of my upbringing. My *mami* used an example often, where she compared us, her children, to the fingers in her hand. She would say,

Ves los dedos de mi mano? Son cinco dedos diferentes y cada uno tiene su tarea especial. Pero juntos, son poderosos y pueden hacer muchas cosas. A la vez, yo le doy a cada uno de Uds. lo que cada uno necesita. Y no porque le doy a uno, le doy al otro. Solo les doy lo que cada uno necesita.

This visualization gave me direction throughout life. *Todos tendrán lo que necesitan.* Collaboration is key (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2009). Together, we can give teachers and students what they need. Our unique characteristics make things even better. Distributed leadership resonated with that.

The literature review suggests that teachers need to work collaboratively and look at instructional practices and their impact on student learning (Elmore, 2000; Dufour, 2004; Militello, 2009; Knowles, 2020). In this article, as a Latina leader, I propose that leaders need to start getting to know the context of their new assignment and get to know the people working in it first (Malen, 2009). The second step is to conceptualize a clear and compelling future with teachers and with those that have the most influence over student learning. This process ensures that multiple viewpoints and multiple perspectives can agree on what would be the best scenario possible for a school that is working effectively. This starts with an asset-based mindset and looking at equitable practices. Collectively, we could identify specific best practices and describe what they would look like if we implemented them at our site (Zuieback, 2013). Our teachers are our best resource for ideas and for making these ideas come to fruition. So, the first step is to establish our direction, or true north.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is that of Storytelling and Testimonio. It is a call to action. Currently, most administrators fail to take the time to develop a shared vision with their partners. They are quick at pointing out deficits and data gaps and telling their staff what to do. This prescriptive approach often falls on deaf ears. This narrative is considered a qualitative method that is used to increase understanding and to develop a sense of urgency. It is not a myth or fable or accidental in nature. It is rather based on multiple experiences that were carefully planned and resulted in successful outcomes through many years of application and lived experiences. This testimonio is “intentional and political” (Reyes and Curry, 2012) and it aims to challenge issues related to inequities and educational reform in a Eurocentric institution (Delgado Bernal et al, 2012). My first assignment as a leader was to turn a school around that was struggling. Besides a drop in state scores, there had been 4 principals in 2 years, the school had high numbers of student suspensions, teacher grievances, and low attendance. Boundaries had changed and the number of English Learners increased significantly. Teachers were not happy about this change. Bottom line was, 70% of the students and their families looked and sounded like me. I questioned the decision of the superintendent to place me in a school that was plagued by disruptions in parent meetings by the political voices against any Spanish translation for parents. He had *confianza* in me. I had to find a way to build a team in this context. I had to reach deeply and tap into the strategies I was familiar with that would be transformational, transparent, and that would build trust. My Testimonio shares the strategies I used and improved year after year based on lessons learned as a Latina growing up in a collectivist culture where collaboration, common goals and the success of the community are most valued. Thus, the approach utilized in this Testimonio is highly relational (Ortiz, 2020), “through positive and nurturing interactions with others” (p. 484). To give a sense of a true Testimonio, I am using *mi lengua* and code switching to illustrate my own unique experiences.

Déjame que Te Cuente

There are two parts to this story. First, you need to get to know your context. You are new in this environment, so you are the outsider. You know this feeling very well. You are an immigrant, you are a second language learner, and you must learn to navigate this new world, new culture. You learn that although things are different, you need to understand these differences. My mom always told me, *Hablando se entiende la gente*. I knew it would help me build trust. It is time to use this skill. Listen first, and foremost, listen to understand. The context of where you are is very important. “What is the common language? What is the culture? You need to learn those before you can be accepted as a member of the community. Once you know your people and your context, you are ready to set a destination (Vision) which constitutes the second part of the story.

First Step: *Conoce a tu Gente y a tu Patria*

For this stage, *tus primeros pasos*, you need to understand your context. That includes the community, the people that work in this place, what their belief systems are and the structures that are in place. In other words, you need to learn the culture and the system where it lives.

First, assess the situation. One of my mentors, Dr. V., advised me to conduct a “Listening and Learning Tour.” You need to learn the landscape, your community, your people. Talk to everybody informally, visit classrooms, ask parents, community members, etc. “Feel” the school. Talk to the school secretary and custodian as your top experts. This will help you start feeling the school, but this is not enough, you need to collect data.

Go Deeper -To get a hold of what is happening at the school behind closed doors, you will have to be more strategic in data gathering. At this point, it is you and them. They are the experts. You just joined them. What do they value? What are their perceptions of their school? What do they expect from you? Would teachers and staff have their own kids attend this school? Ask everybody! To accomplish this, you will have to strategize (Review, H. B., 2017). Although this is a business practice, I adjust the questions to fit the context and the culture of the site.

Strategy #1: Formal Interviews

Conduct formal Interviews. Schedule 10–15-minute individual interviews with every staff member. Start by being sincere and truly caring about their wellbeing. Ask about them, their families, their goals. Then you will follow with questions that ask them about their school, their opinions, their perceptions, and their hopes. Here are a few simple questions you can ask:

1. **What is the one thing you are most proud of at this school?** If we had an opportunity to re-open the school, what would you want to take with us?
This will give you an insight of what they value, which programs they like (and see if this is because the program works or because it makes their lives easier. Sometimes their answer is completely unexpected and unrelated to the program itself.
2. **What is something that needs to go away or needs to be restructured?** There are usually three types of answers. Some will tell you which programs should be eliminated completely. Others will tell you about things that need to be “fixed.” And thirdly, staff will tell you of the current issues that could be fixed now (low hanging fruit.) Make sure you ask them what is wrong, exactly. Ask for details. This will help you later when you are mapping their answers.
3. **What can I count on you to do outside of your current role?** We are not asking a person to restate what is in their job description. We are asking them to voice their level of commitment for the students and the school. This can be a scary question, especially when a teacher is overwhelmed with their own class assignment and the daily challenges they face. Nevertheless, these questions make them open themselves up to the school as a member of a community, a responsibility that goes beyond their classroom and makes them think of strengths that they can put into practice.

4. **What do you expect of me?** This can be a scary question for you, the administrator. Maybe their expectations are beyond what you thought your role would be. But just like in the last three questions, you will start understanding the needs of the staff and the school in a different way. It will help you see the bigger picture and it will challenge you to think of new ideas, new challenges and actions that have been neglected for a while, including, the low hanging fruit.

Strategy #2: Expand the Circle

Take the questions to all classified staff, parents, and students. Due to the numbers, you will have to ask these questions in a different setting. Gather focus groups and start with your personal story, what are your passions, and your dreams as an educator. Then follow up with the same questions.

You already might have different leadership groups taking place on your campus such as the English Learner Advisory, African American Advisory, Associated Student Body, Athletics, etc. Take the same questions to them and ask them in a group setting, adjusting the questions appropriately.

Strategy #3: Analyze Your Results: El Mapa Politico

You now have enough information to create a political map. What are the needs, who are the players, what are their goals? Both personal and for the school. Who is willing to collaborate with you? Who do you need to work with? Who are the leaders? You are trying to understand the power relations in this place (Malen, 1994).

To organize all this information, you must map it out. We call this the SoCal approach. My friends from Southern California would appreciate this name. You read it here first!

Strengths

Off limits

Changes needed

Aspirations

Low hanging fruit

Create a map of the answers and identify trends, such as strengths, areas that are off limits for now, perceptions of things to be eliminated or changed, aspirations and hopes for the school. In addition, identify the “low hanging fruit” and take care of it as quickly as possible. You could use other methods, like the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (SWOT) Analysis (Fea, 1973), but what is the fun in that? Let's go over each component.

Strengths: Through your interviews you will understand what teachers and staff perceive as their strengths. In my experience, the more challenging the environment, the more connected to each other people will be. They are survivors, so they had to rely on each other to ‘make it.’ Therefore, they consider each other their biggest asset. This is a great opportunity for you since they have become your best assets as well, your human resources.

Off limits: Through these interviews, you will also find what is near and dear to their hearts. Besides each other, they might have some traditions that they will not give up for anything! Tread lightly! Even if you think this needs to change or go away, wait. As the new administrator, you are in no position to make such change. Remember that you are in your Listening and Learning Tour. One of the biggest mistakes made by eager and new administrators is to make changes and add new things without consulting with the people that have run this place for years.

Changes needed: This might be your only opportunity to make changes at first. Do not be hasty. In your interviews, when they say that something needs to go, it might be related to a district mandate or a great program. For example, teachers might tell you that evaluations need to go. That is impossible and outside of your purview. Be sure to pay attention to the details that need changing that are within your sphere of influence. Your analysis of these answers is critical!

Aspirations: Many staff members will express their desires through these interviews. When they answer Questions # 1 and 2, they are telling you what they love about their place, and what needs changing. Read between the lines. What do they wish for? What are their aspirations?

Low hanging fruit: This is key to building trust. Just like you identify their aspirations, they will also mention things that could be easily addressed: the gate that should remain locked for safety; the number of copies assigned to each teacher; a quick change in schedule; the number of bells before and after lunch; or others.

These actions will build trust. You sincerely want the best for the school, and you are showing that. Now they know you are listening. *Paciencia.*

Segundo Paso: A Dónde Vamos?

Creating a Shared Vision: The Missing Link in Continuous Improvement Efforts.

Now that you know the lay of the land, it is time to co-create a clear destination in our journey. You are starting to act and feel like a community member. People understand you want the best for the school, so it is time to start clarifying what that means. Have you ever had the thought: "One day our school is going to be a school like that!" This phrase is one we use when we see a car go by and we say, "One day I will have a car like that." "One day I will have a career like that!" The good news is that as a new principal, you can co-design "a school like that." This would be a school where all adults work collaboratively to ensure every child has access to the resources they need to be successful. Sound familiar? We know that every school in the United States must have a vision to receive funding from the state or federal government. Unfortunately, many see creating a vision as compliance and not as a commitment made to every student that attends the school. In this manuscript, part of my intent is to show how imperative it is to have a clear and shared vision that will serve as the "true north" for all stakeholders in a school that desire to develop an equitable and just system for every student in their charge and any future student that will walk through their doors. To do that in an effective way there are several steps you need to follow, and although you may have heard about these in isolation, there is a systematic way to accomplish this. This new way empowers every staff member to see themselves as part of "a school like that."

Strategy #4: Develop Your Vision with Teachers.

To accomplish any goal, you all need to move in the same direction, right? For this activity, you must start with the people that have the most influence over student success: teachers. The recommendations from the literature review are that teachers need to examine their own practices to identify any gaps in student learning. To identify some of these gaps, I adapted the activity that I learned from Steve Zuieback many years ago called—*Totems, Taboos and Repetitive Interactions* (2013). I adapted this strategy to facilitate the goals I wanted to achieve. Zuieback recommends the following order: Repetitive Interactions, Taboos, and Totems. I changed the order. Instead of starting with Repetitive Interactions, I start with Totems, proceed with Repetitive Interactions and end with Taboos. I found that it is easier for people to dream about things that could be accomplished if everyone put forth the same effort. Starting with quantifiable accomplishments, especially those we are held accountable for, makes these dreams possible. Then we explore the behaviors of those people that would work in such a place (qualitative data). Then we discuss what we would never see in such a place which become the Taboos and part of the commitments.

Choose a time when teachers will be together for at least one hour of uninterrupted time. If you are working in a different context outside of a school setting, then work with the people that do the work in that department and that are directly responsible for the outcomes of that unit. I have replicated this activity as a director and as an assistant superintendent. Every time I have used this strategy, it results in people being empowered, ignited, and you can see the collective power immediately. Our goal here is to empower the adults in the organization, to do the work that will impact our ultimate goal, improving student outcomes. For this activity, you need to plan and monitor your time, so you do all three parts in one single session. This is critical to its success.

Totems- Our Dreams. Start with the concept of “a school like that.” Ask the question, “If we were a school where all parents wanted to send their kids to, all teachers wanted to send their own kids or relatives to, what would that school accomplish? What are those measurable outcomes they would reach? Think about our current accountability measures, what would a school like that accomplish?”

List all ideals that a school would accomplish, no matter how unattainable it seems at the present time. *Paciencia*, give people time to dream. You need to tap into their desires and into their possibilities. For this part, make sure we have quantitative measures, true signs of academic success that schools seek to accomplish.

Repetitive Interactions. Now that we can see our destination, ask the question, what would teachers in “a school like that” be seen doing all the time? What would be the observable behaviors of the teachers in such a school?

For this section, come up with as many behaviors that are within the teachers sphere of influence. Inevitably, they will want to come up with statements that include parents or students. You need to be in control, so you tell them that this is about us, the people in this room.

Taboos. Now that we know what our dream school looks like, let’s talk about what we would never see in “a school like that.” Depending on your context, this brainstorming is just as

powerful as the Totems and Repetitive Interactions. Teachers will share those things that they want to change in the school. Those behaviors that they no longer want to see.

The Wrap up. After these lists are completed, we need to consolidate what we just accomplished. First, we have a clear picture of where we want to go, our destination. The Totems serve as our goals. Second, we have a list of behaviors that we know would ensure success. These are now our commitments. We will start behaving like this and soon our goals will come to fruition. This statement by Douglas B. Reeves (2009) supports this idea. If we start behaving as “the school like that,” as if we already had reached our Totems, then we will believe this is possible.

Behavior precedes belief - that is, most people must engage in a behavior before they accept that it is beneficial; then they see the results, and then they believe that it is the right thing to do...implementation precedes buy-in; it does not follow it (p. 44).

If we start behaving like we agreed to, we will believe that this dream is possible. Finally, the taboos are those behaviors we want to minimize. All of us, not just the leader, are responsible to guard against them and to remind each other that this is not what we do here. It will take a collective effort to manage those negative behaviors.

Now we have our goal of becoming a “school like that” and we know what that looks like, what it doesn't, and what we can accomplish. We are moving from an accountability system that is not about compliance, but rather, it is about our commitment to make it happen.

Strategy #5: Making it Happen! Juntos Sí Podemos!

Memorialize your new vision. Create a chart with the commitments. Post them in the Teacher's Handbook. Bring them to every staff meeting or professional learning. They are part of us now. *At this school the staff is committed to...*

Share them with the rest of the school community. Have teachers come up with three vision statements or mottos that represent the “School like that” vision. Have a contest where every staff member, parent leader, and student votes for their favorite one. Once you have that Vision Statement, you can operationalize it with your goals and commitments. Memorialize them in a couple of murals and all the main communications for the school: Staff handbook, Student Handbook, Home to School Compact, District Plan, your evaluation. Once they are in print, you believe them, and you live them. You have invested in your social capital and human capital. Most importantly, your community partners share in this new vision for success.

Use the commitments as often as you can in staff meetings. Review them regularly and during moments of crisis, like rumblings from teachers during stressful moments, at the beginning of the year, before testing, at the end of the year.

Once there is clarity in your destination and your collective commitments, the learning community is ready to review the data and identify where they are now and where they want to go this year. Develop goals from the *Totems*, create assessments, monitoring tools, etc. These commitments and goals become the new way of “doing things around here”. Goals must be SMART for the year, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely. Staff is ready to have this conversation and most importantly, they know which behaviors will lead them to success.

Conclusion

This paper has described my Testimonio in the implementation of leadership strategies that were successful. Two main activities that could help leaders know their school and their context and that helps them develop a shared vision statement, operationalize it into commitments, and into goals. These strategies can be used in any school, district, or educational environment where a group of people are charged with the production of outcomes that ultimately lead to student success. The whole school community will not only feel like part of a solution, but they will also feel empowered and invigorated, up for the task at hand. As a Latina leader, I used my *talentos y valores* and braided them into my journey as an administrator that needed to comply with an accountability system imposed upon me.

Recommendations/Consejos

The first step for any administrator is to listen to understand while getting to know “their people,” their most important resource. Using the SOCAL method will help a leader understand the landscape and build trust by systematically taking care of the low hanging fruit. Once this is established, the leader has an idea of where people want to go individually. Only then, the second activity can take place where the will of the group will begin to shine. This is the way collaborative structures can get started or repurposed.

Here are just some of the benefits of using this approach:

1. Building relationships
2. Building trust
3. Bringing clarity and co-constructing the vision or destination
4. Knowing your why
5. Empowering teachers
6. Moving from a “compliance” mindset to a “commitment” mindset
7. Increasing coherence by having all constituents be on the same page
8. Letting the experts (teachers) lead the way
9. Using the principles of adult learning theory
10. Being ready for data chats, cycles of inquiry, and establishing collaborative problem-solving teams.

My *Testimonio* provides the reader with a clear road map on how to mobilize the community to focus on student success. A shared vision is designed and implemented. With this approach, teachers start working together and co-constructing their commitments to the school and the students. In addition, the rest of the school community will also understand the vision for the site and will understand their purpose and role in the advancement of goals. I highly recommend that you use these strategies in the order provided. Getting to know the people has to always be first. Only then, can you begin to dream and envision “a school like that.”

Con respeto,

A Latina leader

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