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Soul Sisters: Origins and Accomplishments of a Unique Partnership

Linda L. Lyman

Leadership in poverty schools is essential for success. This article chronicles the partnership of a principal and a speech and language pathologist who have, together and with some angst, brought teachers in the school together to link language development with reading success. Since 1994, Aurthur Perkins and Pat Lindberg have refined a program that is based on common beliefs that children can be successful in schools, that poor parents care much about their children's victories at school, and that reading is the key to success in every subject. Clearly, this documentation of a successful collaboration between a content expert and building leadership reminds us that success for children in at-risk settings is possible through on-site assessment of strengths and implementation of strategies to meet challenges.

"All children can learn" is a contemporary mantra. In urban areas, schools that enroll large numbers of children from families with low incomes are failing to educate these children well. A few schools stand out by actually helping all children to learn. How do we explain those exceptional schools? Researchers, individually and in teams, have studied clusters of these schools and identified their commonalities in terms of components such as a curriculum aligned with standards, strong focus on language, a culture of caring and high expectations, parent involvement, and strong leadership (Scheurich, 1998; Carlson, Shagle-Shah, & Ramirez, 1999; Barth, Haycock, Jackson, Mora, Ruiz, Robinson, & Wilkins, 1999; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Catania, 2001; Haycock, 2001; Carter, 2002; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). Interested in leadership practices and wanting to see for myself such an exceptional school, I arranged to spend one day a week at Harrison Primary School in Peoria, Illinois. Nothing in the research about effective high poverty schools prepared me for the unique partnership that I found at the heart of the school's successful educational program. The purpose of this paper, a slice from a larger qualitative case study, is to tell the story of this unique partnership between two unlikely soul sisters, Aurthur Mae Perkins, principal, and Patricia Gay Lindberg, speech and language pathologist.

About the Author

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From January through April 2002, I spent a total of 85 hours on 12 different Thursdays at Harrison Primary School. During the first five visits, I shadowed Perkins and kept field notes. During the next five visits, I combined observation of Perkins with interviewing 19 of the 53 staff members, ranging from teachers to others in a wide variety of roles. During the two final Thursdays, I spent focused time in classrooms of every teacher I interviewed and conducted one final taped interview with Perkins. A total of 27 staff members completed written surveys designed to ascertain their views about what children living in poverty need from their teachers, principal, and school. I met Lindberg my first day at Harrison, sought her out for informal conversation numerous times, and conducted one lengthy taped interview with her. Both Perkins and Lindberg reviewed the initial draft of this paper and provided clarification and corrections. Both the triangulation of multiple data sources and this member checking process contribute to the trustworthiness of my analysis (Merriam, 2001).

Aurthur Perkins brings her life experience, intelligence, a personal mission, and a dynamic personality to being the principal of Harrison Primary School. The school serves a student population that is 99.7% poor and has a 53% mobility rate. Racial ethnic demographics reported on the 2001 school report card show a population 7.2% White, 89.3% Black, 2.3% Hispanic, and 1.3% Asian/Pacific Islander. Although 12 of the 37 schools in Peoria are on the state's academic watch list because of unacceptable levels of student achievement on state tests, Harrison is not one of them. Perkins is quick to say that the school's level of success would be even higher if the 53% mobility rate could be reduced. She became Harrison's principal in 1992, having taught kindergarten at the school since 1983. Aurthur Perkins is an outspoken, dedicated African American leader.

Pat Lindberg brings personal warmth, a brilliant smile, and intellectual fire to her work. She is a speech and language pathologist who has been

turned loose by a savvy principal to teach teachers what she knows about language development and how that links with reading success. She has teamed with Harrison teachers since 1994 to develop and refine what is now called the Harrison Initiative for Language Learning. Growing up in the white middle-class, she nevertheless developed a heart empathetic to any underdog and a lifelong commitment to social justice. Pat Lindberg views her work as a mission, sees great learning potential in every child, and is outspoken in her dedication to equitable and first-class learning opportunities for all children.

Fresh from an interview with both Perkins and Lindberg, *Peoria Journal Star* columnist Mike Bailey wrote the following in explaining the learning successes at Harrison Primary School:

How has she [Perkins] done it? First she surrounded herself with dedicated staff. She latched onto Lindberg, a speech pathologist who specializes in the language delays that afflict so many inner city children. Though from far different backgrounds, the two act like sisters, saying the same things at the same time, interrupting, and occasionally bickering. Lindberg is the brain expert. . . . Theirs is a provocative one-two punch of science and gut instinct.

It is also a marriage of values. They are adamant that all children can learn, that such should be expected and demanded. Anything short of that is racist. Making children "feel good" is overrated. They do not suffer those who don't buy into the same philosophy. They can be blunt.

They dismiss as "a middle-class view" that poor parents don't care enough about their kids to invest in their educations. Blaming parents makes it too easy to let educators off the hook. "If farmers and doctors operated like teachers, we'd be starving to death and letting blood," Lindberg says, twice, without apology.

There is no magic elixir, they insist. Reading is the key to academic success in every subject. (Bailey, 2001, p. A4)

The School's Setting

Harrison Primary School, which enrolls 475 children PreK-4, is located on the grounds of a large public housing project in one of the poorest areas of Peoria. The Harrison Homes Public Housing Project is home to families that include approximately 600 youth under the age of 20, with 281 of those five or under. Children from the project and surrounding neighborhood attend the school. The average annual income for a Harrison Homes household is calculated by the Peoria Housing Authority to be \$5,217. To get to the school requires driving into an area of two-story brick apartments, many of which are completely vacant with boarded-up doors and windows. A police car is not an uncommon sight. Built in 1901, the three-story school ambles out from its central core due to numerous additions and extensions. Entry into the school is possible through a number of doors. Although situated in a high crime part of town, the school doors are unchained.

Most visitors park along the west edge of the school and enter orange colored double doors on the side of the building. A wide hallway extends straight ahead, as well as to the left and right. The floors are shiny linoleum. The walls are brown brick halfway up, with cream-colored paint on walls reaching to the high ceiling. Florescent light fixtures, suspended from the 15 foot high ceiling, span the hall every ten feet or so and provide illumination for the colorful murals, prominent displays of student work, and artifacts of the school's history. The principal's office is to the right. The office and clinical space for the speech pathologist is upstairs on the second floor and down one of the many long hallways. On the days I was there, Lindberg was frequently in and out of Perkins' office.

The School's Success

The current learning successes at Harrison are no surprise to the principal or the staff. In the words of Joan Martin, a Harrison teacher since 1976, "When I first started teaching down here somebody made the comment that Harrison is the devil's island. People were placed down here because the district wanted to get rid of you and this was the place to make it happen." She described how Principals Dick Green (serving from 1982 – 1987), Ken Hinton (serving from 1987 – 1992), and now Aurthur Perkins "have turned this school completely around." Change began in the early 1980s with physical improvements to the neglected building. Today high expectations for students' achievement and behavior have become the norm, and Perkins has been central to that transformation.

Aurthur Perkins and the staff have developed and implemented a wide range of educational programs and supports for the children and their families. These included after school uniforms, a variety of orderly procedures, a multi-faceted after-school program, incorporation of technology with computer programs such as *Breakthrough to Literacy*, an instructional focus on engaged learning, a comprehensive educational component for family members, and the *Second Step* violence prevention curriculum. Most of the professional staff members have been at the school ten years or longer.

Pat Lindberg is a major partner in the leadership of the school. She initiated and continues to guide the development of a significant and original classroom-teacher-delivered phonemic awareness instructional program that has evolved into the Harrison Initiative for Language Learning.

The state of Illinois implemented a new testing program, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) program, in 1998-1999. Based on newly developed state curriculum standards the test was considered to be more rigorous than the previous Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP) tests. ISAT scores validated the learning success of the children. As reported in the *Peoria Journal Star*, "While students at Harrison have previously struggled on other standardized tests, this year proved to be much better for the school" (Brown, 1999, p. A1). In math, 70% of the students met or exceeded the state

standards, doing better than district wide or statewide results. In reading 51% met or exceeded the state standards as well. Brown continues,

Perkins credits much of the improvement to the Harrison Initiative for Language Learning, a reading and language program that was developed by school staff members and was implemented five years ago. . . . The school will continue to work with reading comprehension, which Perkins said should help improve student scores on the writing. (1999, p. A9)

Students from Harrison have continued to do well academically on the state tests. On the 2001 ISAT tests, 55% of third graders at Harrison met or exceeded the state standards for math, 64% met or exceeded the state standards for reading, and 69% met or exceeded the state standards for writing. Visitors to this newsworthy school have been many, including in 2000 then presidential candidate George W. Bush. When asked what educational research had made the most difference to the Harrison program, Perkins' answer was "the research that Pat Lindberg shared about phonemic awareness." The origins and accomplishments of their unique partnership offer insights to all persons in positions of educational leadership.

Origins of a Unique Partnership

Aurthur Perkins, age 63, grew up in a large, extended African American family that had more than its share of hard times. She describes herself as having been a "bossy" young girl who liked to take charge of things, an excellent straight "A" student with an uncanny love of reading. Born in Richmond, Indiana, her family moved first to Macomb, Illinois, and then to Peoria when she was about 10. She dropped out of school in eighth grade at age 13 when she had a baby. When the baby was born, Aurthur lived with her hardworking mother and two brothers in Peoria. She learned much from her mother, a college graduate, and a resourceful woman who could figure out how to make things work well. From her mother, who gave her strong support, Aurthur absorbed the value of work. Life was challenging but neither she nor her mother ever accepted welfare. Aurthur worked to help provide a living for the family and eventually also assumed the responsibility of caring for her brothers and mother after heart disease left her mother too ill to work. Her jobs always involved working with people.

Aurthur has been married for 49 years and has raised seven children, six sons and one daughter. For years she has been active in a variety of community endeavors and organizations, currently serving as Chairwoman of the Peoria Housing Authority Board of Commissioners. In fact, volunteerism led her to resume her education. A volunteer tutor at a school attended by her own children, Aurthur became outraged that so many African American children could not read and no one seemed to care. Determined to do something about this injustice, she went back to school in her late thirties to get her GED. She had two sons in college at the time. She continued with higher education until she earned a B.S. in Elementary Education from Bradley University in Peoria

in 1982. After a year of substituting, she began her teaching career at Harrison as a Pre-K teacher, moving into the kindergarten classroom after a year. Reflecting on her almost 20 years at Harrison, she said, "This is where my heart was, my roots were here. I came from a project myself, and I felt a kinship to the people of this area, this school. It just felt like this was home to me." Having earned her M.A. in Educational Administration from Bradley in 1990, Aurthur was ready to move from the kindergarten classroom across the hall into the principal's office when offered the position in late fall of 1992.

Pat Lindberg, age 57, grew up in Peoria in a two-parent middle class family with one sister who was thirteen years younger than she. She describes herself as having been an introverted, quiet, and shy young girl who loved to read. Right after high school she followed a boyfriend to college at Eastern Michigan University. Pat was unsure about a major but was interested in psychology. Arguing from the belief that female students would not pursue education beyond college and psychology careers required a graduate degree, a university career counselor talked her out of a psychology major. At the time, nursing or teaching were considered appropriate career choices for women, so Pat picked elementary education as a major. In the classes she learned quickly that this major was not a good fit, so she transferred to speech therapy before her freshman year was over. She actually chose speech therapy not because she knew anything about it, but because of the example of a resident assistant she admired who was a speech therapy major. Besides the elementary education major, the other thing that ended during her freshman year was the romance that had taken her to Michigan. Eventually Pat returned to Peoria, transferring as a junior to finish her B.S in Speech Therapy (1968) and M.A. in Speech and Hearing Science (1969) at Bradley University. She became a nationally certified speech and language pathologist (SLP) after completing the 300 hours of clinical practice requirements and passing the national test.

Pat has been passionate about social justice for decades. Her early sensitivity to injustice developed from having Jewish great-grandparents in her background and partly from books she read as a young girl. Her mother's attitude, unusual for the time, was that people who were different were simply more interesting. In college, when a sorority told her that her Jewish roommate would not be invited to join because she was Jewish, Pat told the sorority that she would not join either. Because of her adamant stand against the group's discriminatory position, she and her roommate were both invited to pledge. Pat also marched in college demonstrations in the 1960s for the civil rights movement. Additional learning experiences came in 1969 when she accepted her first position at a psychiatric hospital. Her supervisor was an African American woman. Pat's commitment to social justice developed further when she saw firsthand how this thoroughly competent professional woman was almost routinely confronted with issues of prejudice because of her race. In the 1970s, Pat's activism led her to be part of a diverse "Panel of American Women," sponsored by the YWCA, that gave speeches to groups around the community on reducing

prejudice and discrimination based on religious, racial, or any other kind of diversity.

Pat has been married for 33 years and has raised three children, two sons and a daughter. One son was born with a significant hearing impairment. The other son, a Korean child living in an orphanage, was adopted as a 3 or 4 year old. No one knew his exact age and he hardly spoke, even in Korean. Pat's skills as a speech and language pathologist were called into use at home for both of her sons. All three of her children succeeded in school. After becoming a mother, she continued her career. Since 1969, Pat's work settings have included a psychiatric hospital, a nursing home, a private therapy practice, a special education cooperative, and several school districts. She accepted a position with the Peoria Public Schools in 1991.

The unique partnership of Aurthur Perkins and Pat Lindberg got off to a rough start. Pat had worked for two years for the Peoria Public Schools in a classroom for language-impaired children. The district decided to reorganize and eliminate these classrooms. In the summer of 1993, her central office supervisor asked her to choose where she wanted to work. Offered several possibilities, she chose Harrison. She was told the school had a small enrollment and that there would be lots of language problems but a manageable caseload. She also had never met Aurthur, who was ready to begin her first full year as principal of Harrison. Knowing that there were two speech rooms, one on the second floor and one on the third, Pat remembers going to the office at the beginning of the 1993-1994 academic year to meet the principal and get her room assignment. "I'm Pat Lindberg, your new speech pathologist. Which office shall I take?" she asked Perkins. Aurthur's unenthusiastic loudly delivered reply was something like, "I didn't want you. I didn't ask for you. I wanted someone else." Nonplussed, Pat remembers replying, "This is a great welcome. Too bad. I'm here. You'd better get used to it!" She picked the second floor office and went upstairs to explore the student files.

Upstairs, she immediately realized that the files were not up to her standards, called her central office supervisor to get right over, and informed Perkins that this was a meeting she needed to attend. By the time the meeting was over Aurthur had adjusted her attitude toward Pat, realizing that Lindberg knew something and was a forceful person to be respected. In her first days at Harrison, Pat also discovered that the school was not small but enrolled at that time more than 500 students. In the next few months she found an enormous challenge, so many children with language problems that a typical speech pathologist's way of working – individual twice-a-week 20 minutes sessions – was going to be like "spitting in the wind," impossible even for a seasoned professional.

Origins of an Innovative Program

Lindberg first became aware of research linking phonemic awareness to reading success when she attended an American Speech-Hearing-Language Association (ASHA) convention in 1986. By default, she explained, she found herself in a session being given by Alan G. Kamhi and Hugh W. Catts.

Intrigued by what she heard the next day, she sought out another of their sessions. Kamhi and Catts, both pioneers, have continued to be advocates for including phonemic awareness instruction when addressing reading problems. She left the convention sold on the idea that one key to success in reading was to explicitly teach phonemic awareness. A few years later she had the opportunity to take a short course on phonemic awareness taught by Catts at the University of Wisconsin. Her study of phonemic awareness instruction continued during the next few years. At first, she used it with individual students and began to collect articles about the emerging research. At schools where she had worked before arriving at Harrison, she had made some efforts to interest principals in doing school-wide phonemic awareness programs, but had been met with skepticism.

Overwhelmed with the huge caseload of language impaired children and knowing that she needed a different approach to survive, Lindberg soon was putting copies of the research articles she had collected on Perkins' desk. She sought opportunities to share with Perkins her conviction that facilitating language development through phonemic awareness instruction could make an enormous difference to the children's academic success. Always looking for new approaches to help children learn to read, Perkins was intrigued and they were soon engaged in frequent conversations about the possibilities. In late winter, Perkins asked Lindberg to give a one-hour presentation to the faculty during the March in-service day on this idea that reading problems were based on an inability to discriminate and remember phonemes.

Lindberg remembers being quite nervous about how to condense what was at least a whole college course into an hour. The presentation went well, and most teachers were very receptive, particularly the kindergarten teachers. Trying to deal with the huge caseload, Lindberg had been doing some group therapy in the kindergarten rooms. The teachers asked her if she could use those groups to demonstrate how to teach phonemic awareness. She did and they were impressed. Perkins became convinced that this was a good direction for the school to take. One day in May, she gave the state's Change Grant materials to Lindberg and said, "Write this grant so we can get this started!" "But," said Pat, "I don't know how. I have never written a grant." Help was literally around the corner in the person of Andrea Earnest, a multi-talented individual then in her second year as Harrison's Discovery Room teacher. She and Pat had become friends when Pat had worked with her to create language activities in the school's unique Discovery Room. Pat and Andrea wrote a Change Grant that Perkins submitted to the state. Realizing that if they were to receive the grant they would need materials, Perkins suggested they write a grant to a local private foundation to purchase the decodable books. They actually got that grant and had the books before being notified that their Change Grant application had been successful.

Pat and Andrea (who today works with truancy prevention) collaborated many times to secure grant support for the continuing development of the curriculum and instructional program that began as a reading initiative. The major components of today's comprehensive Harrison Initiative for Language

Learning are decoding (including phonemic awareness), comprehension, and pragmatic skills. During the 1994-1995 academic year Lindberg worked with the team of kindergarten teachers, providing the training and doing the curriculum writing while the teachers came up with the activities to put the research into practice. The grant money paid for substitutes as well as stipends so that the kindergarten teachers were able to meet with Lindberg for a half day weekly to develop these new techniques and materials for enhancing language skills. For example, Lindberg would bring to the teachers research saying that a student needs to practice something fifteen times. She explained,

They would say, but a kindergarten student will not do that fifteen times. We have to have a game. And then they would create the game. So it was a perfect kind of teaming with knowing what the research said, and knowing how to apply it to a student. The kindergarten teachers and I became a team. They had ownership of the program as did I. We all owned it; it wasn't just one person's.

The curriculum and materials were simultaneously developed and implemented in the kindergarten classrooms. The first year Lindberg spent a half day every week with the kindergarten teachers and the next four to five years almost that much time with teachers in the other grade levels, particularly grades 1 and 2.

Says Lindberg, "I wish I had thought of this. I didn't. All I did was read the research and try to figure out how to apply it in a classroom situation. There was nothing in the research at the time we wrote our curriculum that showed this being done by teachers in a classroom situation." Preliminary analysis of the longitudinal data that have been kept on the approximately 1000 children who have experienced the Harrison program "shows that children we had from the beginning make very good progress and maintain their progress." Summarizing the expanding program, Lindberg wrote in a 1999 district published handbook,

Encouraged by student achievement, teacher satisfaction, and positive test results, Harrison Staff has spent four-and-a-half years refining and extending the language curriculum to include grades Pre-k through fourth. Furthermore, we are now not only working on language skills requisite to reading but also on prosocial language skills.

Why is phonemic awareness instruction particularly helpful for children from low-income families? Lindberg replied,

Bottom line is, if you look at the schools in urban poverty areas that are successful, without exception that I know of every school focuses on reading and language as the primary skills to be taught. That seems like it might leave out things that are important, but if children can't read or speak effectively, they can't do anything else.

Lindberg continued, explaining that children growing up in poverty environments “have 13 million fewer experiences with conversation than their middle class age peers before beginning school.” She elaborated,

Phonemic awareness is a primary linguistic auditory skill that happens from birth. Most children have mapped all the sounds of their language onto neural receptors in the brain by six months of age. Unfortunately, living in poverty can hinder that normal development for many reasons – health reasons, noise reasons, the number of language interactions with adults, and so on. What happens is they just simply do not have enough experience for a multitude of reasons with particular sounds to develop a good working sound map in their brains. Our auditory memory develops with our language. As a result for many of these children the auditory skills that serve as a foundation for reading are missing.

One of these skills is phonemic awareness or the awareness that language is composed of small units of sound. When asked to explain her assertion that reading was primarily based on this auditory skill, Lindberg explained:

Basically what we are talking about here is that to read children have to learn sounds, they have to learn to match a sound with a symbol for that sound. Next they have to learn the skills of synthesizing the sounds into a word and then breaking the word into individual sounds. In reading when we ask a child to sound out a word what we are actually asking them to do is to concentrate and think about the individual sounds in that word. It is actually a fairly simple process, but it has to be explicitly taught to children who don't have enough experience with language to have learned it on their own. It is very labor intensive, a very systematic kind of teaching, more like therapy. Being a speech pathologist, I am used to breaking things down systematically, which is why I think I was able to help teachers figure out how to do this. Many people talk about the importance in reading of teaching phonics, but if you don't have phonemic awareness, which is the ability to separate a word into its component sounds, phonics won't even help you.

Wanting a base of data from which to document success of the new curriculum, in the spring of 1994, Lindberg gave all kindergarten students a diagnostic test. Scores from the Test of Awareness of Language Segments (TALS) showed that at the end of 1994 only 29% of the 95 students finishing kindergarten were ready for instruction in a regular basal reading series. By the spring of 1995, the new curriculum having been implemented as it was developed; scores from the same test show 59% of the 92 students completing kindergarten were ready for regular basal reader instruction. Every spring since 1995, continuing administration of the TALS has shown that from 73% to 79% of the students completing kindergarten were ready for a basal reading series. These results were encouraging, but the real validation of the effectiveness of the program came with the previously discussed state achievement test scores in the fall of 1999. “For the first four years, when we were doing our work with the curriculum we did not see any significant results on

the state achievement tests, and we did not get any support from the central office. I guess I personally felt like I was a one person crusade at times, because even Mrs. Perkins herself sometimes doubted and wondered whether she had put her eggs in the wrong basket," said Lindberg.

Leadership Insights

The story of this unique partnership has implications for principals who would provide leadership to transform schools into successful learning environments for children from low-income families. Conceptually, this very human story is about having a mission, creating a family environment that can survive disagreements, reading the research, becoming a team by breaking down boundaries and roles, and providing both support and pressure to enable change.

Having a Mission

The success of this school demonstrates the importance of a principal's beliefs in leadership for learning in high poverty schools (Haberman, 1999). Aurthur Perkins' work as a principal is a *calling* guided by strong values and belief in the potential of the children to learn and lead productive lives. Having walked in their shoes, she is a role model in the community, proof that a different life is possible. When interviewed, she said emphatically,

I will use any method and means I have to, do whatever I can to make a child successful. There are so many that don't have anybody else to fight for them. So I fight for the rights of these children to be successful, to get out of this place. I am committed to the cause of the children, of all children, black or white, because the white ones that are poor are just like we are. They don't have the same opportunities either. So you give them a lift and show them that you care. I do not see children as black or white, and neither does my staff. They have been trained not to do that. When I hear any such discussion I address it right away.

Perkins is committed to the learning and success of the children, has created a family at Harrison School, and loves every day she comes to work.

Creating a Family Environment

Describing the school's family environment Perkins said, "I love my staff. I love my children. I love the families. I want us to be a family, a happy family, and I work very hard to promote that atmosphere. We have something unique here that you don't always find. You don't find people every day you can fight with, you can cry with, you can laugh with." As in any good family there are disagreements and lots of conversations, sometimes about trivial things but more often about what matters. This conversational milieu creates an atmosphere that fosters growth and change. Perkins is quick to attribute the changes that have been made and the school's success to the hard work of the staff.

The Harrison Initiative for Language Learning is an accomplishment of the entire Harrison family of educators working together to construct meaning and knowledge. As Lambert, (1995b) writes, “change seems to be a natural result of constructing meaning and knowledge together – an outgrowth of our conversations about what matters” (p. 52). Perkins believes the disagreements about what matters contribute to good decision-making. In describing her decision making Perkins explains that she usually calls in a couple of teachers to “bounce things around.” She calls in people likely to have different ideas from each other, “people who will tell her the truth.” She explained, “Any decision that is going to change the school, I always have a team of people with me. I don’t make a lot of those kinds of decisions by myself. When I have to make a decision I do it, but I’m interested in your voice.” Within a family atmosphere Arthur Perkins is clearly an in-charge, reflective and inclusive decision-maker interested in diverse points of view whose reciprocal relationships with staff contribute to positive change.

Reading the Research

Perkins originally did not want Pat Lindberg to be her speech pathologist, but she quickly recognized her as a knowledgeable person. Within a few months Lindberg was on her way to being a full member of the Harrison educational team. Perkins is a principal open to new ideas who respects expertise when she finds it. She is like the woman leader Helgesen (1995) called a transmitter, one who is “gathering information everywhere, making sense of it, rearranging it in patterns, and then beaming it out to wherever it needs to go” (p. 179). A voracious reader since childhood, Perkins keeps up with research about education, particularly about educating children growing up in low-income families. She said,

I pay attention to anything that I think will help. It is little snippets here and snippets there. Pat is really the research guru. She can bring me all kinds of things and put them before my face and I will read them. Sometimes she just lays it down, goes away, and I pick it up and say to myself, “hey, this is an idea that might work.” Sometimes she says, “Here it is. When you get time look at this and see what you think.” And I do.

Perkins paid attention to the phonemic awareness research, understood the potential of the idea, and pushed Lindberg into a leadership role.

Becoming a Team

Perkins attributes her leadership success to “not being afraid to be the leader, but allowing the leadership thing to flow through the whole school and not setting yourself up as some icon.” In our final interview Perkins said, “It all ends and begins with me, but I only have to do that every once in a while, say ‘I am the head honcho here; you do this!’ Otherwise I don’t like that. I don’t like that done to me and that is not my way. It is a total involvement here.” It

has taken total staff involvement and becoming a team to make the Harrison Initiative for Language Learning what it is today.

What began as conversations between Lindberg and Perkins enlarged with the bonding of Lindberg and the kindergarten teachers. The partnership has eventually included all the teachers in the building as well as volunteers and parents who provide extra weekly tutoring help to the students still struggling. The story of this partnership illustrates that “we need to stop thinking of roles or people as fixed entities and instead view them as relationships, as patterns of relationships that involve one another” (Lambert, 1995a, p.34). Pat does not consider Aurthur her boss. There is a relationship of equals, of professional peers, of friends who work together. Others have noted that “as professionals find new meaning in their work together, the patterns of relationships and the structures change” (Lambert, 1995b, p. 53). This has certainly been true at Harrison. The family atmosphere of Harrison makes possible “mutual trust, reciprocal influence, synergy, respect for diverse backgrounds and expertise, and commitment” (Restine, 1993, p. 31), all important factors if an organization is going to allow for the boundary crossing that frees ideas to germinate, people to grow, and talent to flourish.

Providing Support and Pressure

Aurthur Perkins’ strong leadership illustrates the importance of providing both support and pressure to bring about change in schools (Sebring & Bryk, 2000; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). Central to Perkins’ leadership success is her support of the dedicated staff, most of whom she has hired. Asked what she looks for when hiring a staff member for the school, Perkins replied,

I am really looking for someone who at least appears to be strong, a self-starter. And eventually I look for them to take over a leadership role. So I don’t sit on them. I let them have free rein. I try to give them an opportunity to use their gifts and let them flow. That is something I really enjoy about my school. All of them that want to lead can lead, those that want to follow can follow, and the rest can kind of just fit in the middle.

Whereas other principals had told Lindberg that to implement her ideas would be an impossible undertaking, Perkins gave her the opportunity to use her gifts. Perkins’ pattern of including the staff in major decisions demonstrates her understanding of the importance of being a team. The faculty’s generally positive response to Lindberg’s workshop convinced Perkins that providing classroom-teacher-delivered phonemic awareness instruction was something she wanted the school to try. Then as Lindberg tells the story, “she pushed me” to write the large grant that paid for the intensive professional development time that contributed to the success of the program. Keys to the success of the new curriculum were Perkins’ support of Lindberg, of teacher ownership, and of the professional development time required for the new curriculum to be successfully implemented at all grade levels.

Perkins believes that some principals misunderstand leadership to be about control, but pressure and control are not the same. An example of pressure is Perkins' unequivocal backing of the Harrison Initiative for Language Learning. Every day in every K-4 classroom, the teachers begin school 15 minutes early and devote the first hour of every day to language instruction, with time also allocated to math drills and a writing exercise. Says Perkins, "I'd better see this in the teachers' lesson plans and I'd better see it happening when I come in the classrooms." As Lindberg and the kindergarten teachers were developing the kindergarten curriculum, Perkins made clear to the other teachers in the building that they also would be involved as the language program developed by adding a grade level each year. Those who were reluctant were encouraged to request a transfer. Some did; two others retired. In Lindberg's words,

The principal's tone makes a difference. At different times Mrs. Perkins has said this WILL be what you write in your lesson plans. She was very insistent that we were going to do this program. You don't often have a principal that strong. A lot of times you have principals who don't have that kind of conviction. I think it is important for people in leadership to have opinions and to hold to them strongly. Otherwise you are a ship without direction.

A second example of providing pressure comes from something Perkins did as a new principal. When she first took over as principal one of the things that she did was go into the classrooms and ask the teachers a question: 'How many of these children do you really know?' When most responded 'I don't know,' then she remembers saying something like the following:

Well, your first job is to get to know them very well. They have names, they have home lives, and it is time to get to know them as individuals, not as a class. These are individuals, with individual needs, and individual hurts. Everyone in your class has a different problem. You've got to know them, where their strengths are, what their weaknesses are. You must know what motivates a child, why a child is not motivated, why a child is sleeping in class.

Perkins concluded, "That is where I think the changes came from in this building. I insisted on them knowing the children as individuals."

A fundamental way Perkins provides pressure is through high expectations. She also provides clear feedback to anyone – child, parent, or staff member – not meeting her high expectations. She pressures the staff to take risks and fosters innovation. She expects the best. There are "procedures" and ways to do things. When she is out of the building the schools runs as if she were there. Tim Robinson, a truant officer/case worker at the school, explains why:

Because we know what Mrs. Perkins expects and we don't do anything differently just because she is not here. We are a family more or less. We keep

communication lines open all the time so in case something happens we would have some kind of an idea of what to do, we would not be too far from the tree.

Asked how her leadership supports their work, responses from the 19 staff interviewed clustered around her support for them, her clear vision, and her high expectations. Lisa McCready, a veteran of 15 years of teaching at Harrison, summed it up when she said,

She really does know her staff. She knows our strengths and she knows our weaknesses. We know her strengths and we know her weaknesses. We are there to help each other because our goal is the same – success for the children. That vision is clear.

Soul Sisters

Glancing at Aurthur Perkins and Pat Lindberg, no one would ever think them biological sisters because of their obviously different racial backgrounds. They also dress differently, speak differently, and do things differently. Aurthur is more flamboyant; Pat is more concerned about what others think. Pat says that she is more sequentially focused than Aurthur, who gets things done through seemingly random multi-tasking. Each tells the truth as she sees it, although Pat is more inclined to use discretion in doing so while Aurthur is known for “telling it like it is.” These differences of background and style are overshadowed by their similar values. Aurthur’s experiences with poverty and encounters as an African American with the racial injustices of our society have fueled her commitment to make things better for the next generation. At an early age family and books fueled Pat’s concern for social justice. Subsequently, people and events kindled her concern into a passion. In their eloquent outspoken advocacy for poor and minority children, Aurthur and Pat could be twins.

Aurthur had a larger family, but each woman brings a mother’s strength and compassion to her work. Pat’s adopted son’s early environment was similar to that experienced daily by many of the children at Harrison. He had been neglected and abused, but has been able to grow into his potential. In fact, he attended the district’s school for the gifted and is a college graduate. Because of him it is easy for Pat to see the potential for giftedness in even the most troubled Harrison students. Aurthur sees all the children as her own and generously gives them hugs and praise. She is quick to discipline misbehavior sternly, knowing that the lives of many of the children lack structure and discipline. Pat is known for mothering particularly troubled children by investing time in being with them. Both Aurthur and Pat invest considerable time and energy in finding resources to help address the children’s problems.

As women leaders, Aurthur Perkins and Pat Lindberg are focused on the needs of children, they value diversity, pursue knowing, and communicate caring. Both are avid readers with a passion for life-long learning. Each

wants to know about any new idea that might help the children. Each understands her work with children to be a calling. When asked for three words to describe Perkins, Lindberg offered *passionate*, *intelligent*, and *opinionated*, words that actually describe both women. *Spiritual* is also a word that describes them both. One could say, in summary, that as leaders “they carry in their hearts the desire to create communities for children that foster a sense of inclusion and value rather than oppression and alienation” (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998, p. 142). More simply stated, they are *soul sisters*.

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