

# **Becoming Life-Long Learners--*A Pedagogy for Learning About Visionary Leadership***

**By**

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with

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this volume we apply a personal narrative methodology to understanding what we have learned about visionary leadership. Authors in this volume developed their reflections of life-long learning as they investigated existing leadership theories and theories about future leadership. Graduate program faculty and authors read and critically reviewed each others' essays. The goal was to experience the benefits of taking a reflective perspective that challenges previously held beliefs and leads to new beliefs and new questions to pose. A total of 14 reflective narratives are presented. All writers used the intellectual tools described as critical literacy which required readers to apply critical perspectives toward towards the text. Actively analyzing and critiquing texts led to what critical literacy practitioners describe as uncovering underlying messages. We agreed that studying what other people have written sets us up in a special way to better understand the definitions and models for visionary leadership. Self-interrogation represented in the essays helped us to broaden what it meant to be advocates for social justice.

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# Becoming Life Long Learners: A Pedagogy for Visionary Leadership

by

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and

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In this volume we apply a personal narrative methodology to understanding what we have learned about visionary leadership. New England College offers a doctoral program designed to prepare educators to take leadership roles in improving educational systems and advancing student learning and success. Faculty and doctoral candidates work together to gain deep understanding, expanded vision, and diverse professional networks to position themselves for innovative, entrepreneurial leadership in a complex and changing world.

Authors in this volume developed their reflections of life-long learning as part of a doctoral Seminar in Visionary Educational Leadership. Participants investigated existing leadership theories and theories about future leadership. The purpose of the seminar was to assist participants in the development of their own philosophy and theory of futuristic educational leadership. In addition to the reflective essay, participants also penned a leadership philosophy based on sound theory of how to create transformational educational institutions. The course concentrated on the organization of decision-making systems used by institutions. Participants developed their ideas in relation to communication and decision-making patterns for their organizations. Major goals and learning objectives included a) Demonstrate knowledge of leadership theories and their relationship to current educational issues; b) Produce an educational philosophy so as to create a transformational educational system; c) Examine and articulate decision-making systems so as to improve an educational institution/system; d) Explore successful systems at work in educational systems on a global level so as to learn from their successes and be able to suggest appropriate adaptations to the institutions with which we work; e) Become familiar with the work/thoughts of leading American educators—i.e., what can be learned from their experiences; and f) Refine self-reflective skills through an examination of career, course readings, and the discussions with peers in the doctoral program.

Participants met virtually online and asynchronously. They met twice for weekend sessions to fulfill the residency component with Dr. Mary McNeil. Dr. Nevin was responsible for maintaining and directing the online discussion forums that bridged the face-to-face sessions with Dr. McNeil. Seminar discussions focused on local applications of analyses provided by Marc Tucker (2011) in *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems* (Harvard

Education Press) and Richard Elmore (2011) *I used to think...and now I think...: Twenty Leading Educators Reflect on the Work of School Reform* (Harvard Education Press). In both volumes, the editors attempt, as Elmore (2011) stated, to “make learning visible” (p. 2). Participants read and critically reviewed each others’ essays. They were careful to phrase their feedback so as to inspire the writers to revise and refine their ideas. Their actions in the feedback process are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Tips for Critiquing Reflective Essays**

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- Summarize the author(s)’ argument. This can reveal any gaps in the argument and ‘validates’ that you have read the material.
  - Show integrity. Provide a balanced review by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the author(s) argument.
  - Ask questions. Critiques can be framed by asking questions about parts that are hard to understand, or about the origins of the framework, or the authors’ intention at a particular juncture.
  - Reflect what the author is trying to say. If a particular point is unclear, it can be useful to try to reflect that point back to the writer: "What you seem to be saying here is..." The author then can decide if the writer’s feedback warrants further refinement of his/her manuscript.
  - Make suggestions. Help the author(s) with ideas on how to address the gaps or the problems you’ve identified.
- 

Readers may glean the benefits of taking a reflective perspective that challenges previously held beliefs and leads to new beliefs and new questions to pose. A caveat about the essays in general: they represent the beliefs and knowledge of the writer at the time of this writing and may be selective rather than all-inclusive. Nevertheless, we believe that the process of writing a personal narrative leads to deep understanding of why a visionary leadership stance is important for 21<sup>st</sup> century school personnel. Like Peter Drucker (1993) who wrote in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, we believe that the authors were able to lift their vision to higher sights and to raise their performance to a higher standard.

A total of 14 reflective narratives are presented in this volume. All were peer reviewed. All writers used the intellectual tools described as critical literacy which required readers to apply critical perspectives toward towards the text. Reviewers actively analyzed texts and offered strategies for what critical literacy practitioners describe as uncovering underlying messages. We agreed that studying what other people have written sets us up in a special way to better understand the definitions and models for visionary leadership. Self-interrogation represented in the essays helped us to broaden what it meant to be advocates for social justice. We hope you can agree, after reading these essays, that one powerful way to prepare visionary leaders is to encourage them to practice self reflection. Being willing to change one’s mind is a key to visionary leadership.

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## About the Authors

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**Ann Nevin, Ph. D.**, is professor emeritus at Arizona State University and faculty affiliate of Chapman University in Orange, California and Adjunct Faculty for New England College. She is a hearing impaired monolingual female from a 2nd generation family of American Irish and German descent; a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a grandmother and great-grandmother, and a colleague. Ann's work experiences include substitute teaching in rural and suburban schools, teaching remedial math classes at a rural high school, teaching special and general educators in Hawaii, Arizona and Florida. Instead of working as a special education teacher, she helped establish a new consultative role and worked as a consulting teacher in Vermont schools to integrate students with special needs. Ann's research interests began with identifying variables that favorably affect the academic and social progress of students with disabilities in general education environments using single subject designs and simple statistical models. Since 1999, working with colleagues, she moved to ethnographic case study approaches, then, in 2009, she explored how to apply principles from critical pedagogy for inclusive special education when she joined the Chapman University faculty and doctoral students in applying a disabilities studies approach. Over a lengthy career (1969 – present), Ann has authored books, research articles, chapters, and federal and state grants and co-developed various innovative teacher education programs in Vermont, Arizona, California, and Florida to ensure that students with disabilities succeed in normalized school environments.

## *I Used to Think . . . And Now I Think . . .*

Taryn L. Bates

Since I was young I have held onto certain perspectives regarding my passions connected to education. Some aspects of these perspectives have stayed the same and some have changed. The degree to which they have changed varies. I would often talk about my perspectives with such conviction. It was as if I knew exactly what was right based on my perspectives and as I went through my education and first few years of teaching I would often preach these perspectives with conviction to others. As I reflect on my experiences, I now imagine this preaching often came out in a condescending tone as I stood on my soapbox at the ripe old age of 24.

I used to think the knowledge I had about education was gospel and my ideas would only grow and expand. I firmly believed they would not change drastically. I now think the opposite is true. This was particularly true with my perspectives on working with students with behavioral challenges. As I learned strategies and theories along with behavior modification techniques I would question the actions of other professionals and parents. I remember one night at dinner when I was working on my master's degree in Special Education my father smiled at my mom, both seasoned educators, and said "Ah, she sounds like us before we had children." My mother laughed and nodded her head. I remember being annoyed by this comment and quickly stated, with the utmost conviction, "Even after I have kids I will be thinking this way." Well, I still have not had children but I have to admit that my perspectives on this topic have shifted quite a bit over the years. I used to think my perspectives on education would never change. I now realize that there is no way for them not to change.

I used to think that it was important for other professionals I work with to agree with my ideas. If they did not then it meant there was a definite problem. I had trouble with the idea of agreeing to disagree. There is a difference between agreement and collaboration. I thought it was important that when disagreements came up it was critical for one of our perspectives to change. Hess (2011) discusses the importance of pulling together collective expertise in order to make complex change. I now think differing perspectives are beneficial in making change.

The collaborative work a general education teacher and I were involved in demonstrates this point for me. We had different approaches to relating to students. I always work to build a relationship with them based on mutual respect attempting to foster their sense of safety and security in school. The general education teacher had a more traditional approach built on fear and imposing his will. My strength in assisting students with social skill development and relationship building in combination with the general education teacher's expertise with the math curriculum provided us with ample opportunities to enhance each other's professional development. I had a part in softening this teacher up and helping him to build positive relationships with students based on mutual respect. I was often a visual cue for him to remember to think about the social emotional aspect of learning. On the flip side this teacher helped me improve my math skills and I am now more equipped to support my students. The organized way in which he ran his classroom was beneficial for me. I thought of this as I read through Hess'

(2011) article on highlighting the benefits of bringing collective expertise together. Bringing this collective expertise together is a crucial part in order to “produce broad, beneficial change” (Hess, 2011, p. 71). The changes I have had and the changes in this general education teacher seem to have lasted over some time now.

The challenging situations and experiences I have had with other professionals over the years have taught me a great deal. I now think disagreements are important because they cause a community of educators to really think about situations and collaborate. I now think it is important to consider how the needs and concerns of all parties will be addressed.

The importance of collaboration has become clear to me in my work with students as well. I used to think the best way to approach working with students with challenging behavior was to exert my own will upon them. Through a number of trainings, experiences, bumps and bruises, literally, my thinking on this has shifted. I now, wholeheartedly, believe the philosophy of the Collaborative Problem Solving method described by Ablon (2009) “Kids do well, if they can.” It is about skill as opposed to will. Through training, a recent interview with Dr. Ablon, and experiences in my classroom I see the benefit of working collaboratively with students to address their needs and concerns as well as the needs and concerns of the adults. I now think when students are exhibiting challenging behaviors it is a result of thinking skill deficits, not purely a willful student. This shift in thinking has increased my ability to relate to my students as well as other professionals, and all other human beings for that matter. Collaboration is key.

I used to think with training and experience any educator would be equipped to work with challenging students. I continue to think training is an essential aspect; however I realize there are certain individuals who have the capacity to naturally understand how to work with challenging students. Through training and natural ability it came very easily to me. I assumed it would and should come easy to everybody else. Well, anybody who has been in any public school for a period of time knows that although this would be the case in an ideal world, it is not the reality. Many educators have difficulty working with students with behavioral challenges and need a great deal of training in how to do it. There are some educators who despite going through training still are not able to grasp the approaches that work for these students. This is the reality.

I was reminded of this just a few weeks ago when I had a new student exhibiting disruptive behavior in the hallway of my middle school. A teacher walked around the corner, saw the mess in the hallway, and at the top of their lungs, in a playful manner, said “What exploded in the hallway?” They made a point to exaggerate the word exploded. If looks could kill, my glare would have taken this teacher down instantly. For a micro second there was a twisted part of me hoping the student would be agitated by her tone and sock me in the jaw because the teacher was too far away. Maybe that would reiterate the importance of ignoring. Now this is a teacher who I have worked with for years and I have come to respect. Despite the numerous trainings we have done on working with my students, this teacher’s impulsivity took over and the training went out the window. This illustrated for me how there are some people who it comes naturally to, some who develop the skills with training, and a small group of individuals who are unable to fully grasp the concepts, despite training.

I used to think there were certain ways to approach certain groups of students and if a student fell into a certain group than the corresponding approach would be effective. My thinking on this has shifted through the experiences and trainings I have had over the years. I remember being at the Asperger's Association of New England annual conference in 2011 and hearing somebody reference a quote I have continued to hear over and over again. "If you have met one person with Autism, you have met one person with Autism." The truth behind this statement continues to be proven to me time and time again as I work with my students.

My thoughts on this expanded even more throughout the 2012/2013 school year as I went through a series of trainings on Universal Design for Learning put on by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). "Variability is the norm," is a concept running throughout all of the UDL frameworks. As an educator I need to expect variability exists even within the groups of students who I thought would all respond to somewhat similar techniques. I now think there are countless ways to approach one situation. There is no one right way. I now see the importance of trying different strategies in order to establish what is effective and what is not. This involves risk taking, a difficult concept to bring up in regards to education; however I now realize it is an important piece. I have learned that often the greatest rewards come out of the biggest risks.

I used to believe all students would benefit from being in the inclusive setting. I began working in the field of special education when I was fresh out of my undergraduate work at the University of Hartford. I began working as a 1:1 instructional assistant in an intensive special needs program in an affluent public school district. I fell in love with the inclusion model instantly. I thought that it was the only way to service students with disabilities. My firm belief was all students should be in a public school setting in either a full or partial inclusion program. Hehir (2011) talks about his old perspective that all students should attend their neighborhood school and how his view has shifted over time. Hehir now believes there should be inclusion models as well as specialized placements servicing students with low incidence disabilities (p. 63). As I read through Hehir's cognitive changes on this topic I saw my own were in alignment with his.

When I began working at a private separate day school for students with Autism and severe behavior challenges in 2006 my perspectives on inclusion began to shift. Throughout the three and a half years I worked there I saw a number of students who, it was clear to me, could not have their needs met in a public school setting. Their own safety and well-being, as well as that of others, would be in jeopardy within the walls of a public school. The number of close door and lock door time out procedures as well as the restraints we had to do made this clear to me. As I reflect on these experiences it becomes clear to me how critical it is for all students to be in a school setting where their individual needs are able to be met in order to assist them in reaching their own individual potential. I now believe in certain cases inclusion is the best setting for a student and in other instances this is not the case. Like Hehir, I now see the importance of there being a variety of settings available to students equipped to meet the various needs of all students.

I used to think the educational system in the United States was effective and one of the top performing in the world. This belief was based on my own experiences, as both a student and a teacher, in wealthy and high-performing districts. I had not had

much exposure to anything else. I grew up going to school in a high-performing district with ample resources. My first job after I finished my undergraduate degree was also in a wealthy, high performing district. I assumed that the educational settings I had experiences with must exist everywhere. The idealistic mind set I had at the time left me in denial. I did not know what I did not know about the educational system in the United States. As I gathered more experiences working in different settings and have been continuing on with graduate level work in the field of education, I now see how much room for improvement there is within our education system.

I have learned the United States used to be a top performer; however times have changed. I now see the value in looking at the educational systems of other countries in order to see what lessons we are able to derive from them. This became evident to me as I have delved into *Surpassing Shanghai* in which Editor Marc Tucker (2011) examines other countries education systems. Doing this enables us to take these lessons and figure out how to implement them in our country in order to influence positive change.

I used to think I knew a great deal about many aspects of education. I had a solid education and great experiences I would be able to use in order to teach and it was time to use them. I did not realize my education would be continuing throughout my life. Now as I sit here, just about halfway through my doctoral work, I truly consider myself to be a life-long learner who wants to work to make a difference in the world.

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## About the Author

**Taryn Bates** is a second-year doctoral student at New England College in the K-12 Leadership program in Henniker, NH. She received her Masters degree in Special Education from Fitchburg State University in 2006 and her Bachelors in Elementary Education in 2001. Taryn has worked in a variety of educational settings. Her career began as an instructional assistant in Lexington, MA. Upon receiving her Masters degree

she moved down to Maryland and began working in a private day setting through the Kennedy Krieger Institute. In 2010 she moved back to New England, to be near family, where she developed and continues to run a district wide special education program at the middle school level in the North Middlesex School District. Taryn is excited to see what else is in store for her in her life and the lessons she will be able to take away from those experiences.

## *I used to think...Now I Think...*

Laura T. Bennett, M.Ed.

I started my teaching career 15 years ago working in a third grade classroom in a high-poverty urban district in Massachusetts. I was young, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. I believed that I could change the world. Or at least my part of the world. I believed that I could get every child on grade level by June, even if 85% were two years behind coming into my class in September. All I needed was great lessons, strong classroom management skills, and enthusiasm.

I quickly began to realize that along with teaching them academic skills I also needed to teach them an array of other social emotional skills. Students in my class were not just students waiting to learn. Most of my kids needed much more from me than just how to learn to read and write. They were kids, human beings, that needed to be nurtured, loved, and how to communicate with others. How can I ignore their other needs and teach them all the content that I needed to teach them? Also, how in the world could I possibly do that in 9 months? The simple is I could not. Something had to give and priorities had to be set. Curriculum was what our school felt should be the priority and all other pieces should be viewed as secondary to that.

Most students were coming into our classrooms with such gaps in their learning and we (teachers) we told by (administrators) to stick to the curriculum and continue on with the lessons. Our administrators were told to cut out Art and Music and replace it with extra Math and Reading classes. Our students were in a high stakes testing war! As high stakes tests continued to play a more important role in my school system little emphasis was put on creating whole child learning opportunities and more was placed on teaching to the test so our scores would improve. Our curriculum became increasingly narrowed. Music, gym, social studies and hands-on inquiry based science activities were placed on-hold to make room for testing prep time.

When we had professional development the consultants made it seem that the curriculum would address many of our student's gaps in learning and help to provide consistency to our English-Language learners (more than 89%) and a large transient population of students. At first I was excited to learn about research-based practices. I thought, oh wow this is really going to help my kids and make a difference! I quickly began to realize that these "research-based practices" that were so quickly embraced by my district were often not a good fit for our student population. They were usually rigid teacher talk prescriptive procedures that we were told by administrators had be followed to the letter. No creativity, no adapting, no changing it. You follow it or else. "Fidelity to the model." Was the slogan. This, proved to let me and my students down once again.

We, the teachers, were the triage doctors, we would patch students up the best way we could and send them on their way, back out into the battlefield. We were putting Band-Aids on tumors! During the years when the tests came back with poor results, we were told that we were doing it wrong and that the reason why our students weren't making gains was that we probably weren't sticking to the curriculum. During the years when they came back positive, we were asked what we did that was special from

everyone else! (It was those years that teacher got together and added in their own creativity and insight into lessons and adapted the curriculum to fit our student's needs.) At one point I said to myself, this is insanity! Repeating the same thing expecting different results. That's when I left that district.

***Now I think...***

I still believe that we need to teach to the whole child. Children now more than ever in our ever transforming global society need strong social-emotional, problem solving skills, coping mechanisms. Schools need to bring back thematic and project-based learning so that we can naturally integrate all subjects multiple intelligences and teach social skills in context. There should be a coming together of both worlds the content and whole child.

*How would the needs of the whole child be met?*

Since community resources would be used, in order to thread the theme into the community schools would teach to multiple intelligences and talents. Students would be exposed to different ways of learning, expressing ideas, creating solutions to problems, and collaborating within the community. Students will have access to different teaching and learning styles.

Teachers in all subject areas would work in groups to create a curriculum that would align to different learning styles. Members of the community would offer ideas and inspiration to create project-based and community based learning experiences for different types of learners. Teachers would also align these experiences with sound effective instruction and assessment in each learning style. (Gardner, 2006) The schools environment, curriculum, and assessments would be customized and tailored to meet the needs of it students.

*What would learning look like?*

Teachers would teach the majority of their lessons thematically. Teachers would customize lessons that incorporated the theme as well. Students would still be have time to master basic skills and they would be applying those skills.

Teachers, would tailor their instructional methods to meet each learner and have a curriculum that is aligned with 21st century framework. The school's structure would be set up so that teachers with parents and students could design their own curriculum maps to meet the needs of their students. The team would also pay close attention to the types of intelligence that Howard Gardner refers to because classes would be designed to meet the needs of these intelligences.

For example, inside the school small classes would consist of a "traditional" class, a "hands-on" class and a "visual" class. All the classes would teach the same curriculum – but the delivery would be mostly in that mode. Their curriculum maps in those classes would be different in order to meet their learners' needs. (Picture maps showing Boston and New York. Each map would have the same locations but would have different routes to get to the locations, also each map would have a different mode of transportation like a car, train or bus. All students would still be "going from Boston to New York but they will "travel" in different routes and using different types of transportation.)

Teaching programs would identify its teachers and their "intelligences" to see which school would best fit them. Teachers would be highly trained and specialized

similar to doctors and their specialties. Community resources would strengthen the schools teaching by providing project-based learning outside and inside the classroom.

Various community leaders would also be involved at the school level. They would work alongside parents and teachers to create a successful learning environments. The school's climate would improve because teachers would be teaching in a way that fits them and their learners. Instead of constantly having to change pedagogies and teach a different way, depending on which "new" curriculum we were using. The relationships between students and teachers would be much stronger because teachers would be able to connect to these learners. Teachers would understand deeply how their students learn, and what they need in order to be successful.

Elementary schools would teach themes that promote global citizenship and use skills and technology to enhance student's understandings. The local community would have to buy in to the theme or help create it. All stakeholders would need to see its potential usefulness in the community. It is up to educational leaders to open their doors to these schools. Leaders need to open lines of communication in their communities and create lasting partnerships with the global society.

The people of Finland have a very strong educational system that is deeply rooted in its culture. They believe that all people are responsible for a child's education. They are constantly working to improve their system and strengthen it further. This was a recent study done in Finland that looked at how to sustain positive change in education. The researcher ended his study with this quote. "A challenge for education is individualism—we are responsible for the resilience and dignity of each other. Extending of the moral circle of the modern man is crucial because we all form a global community." (Salonen, p 35) Schools should be a place of inspiration and enlightenment, a place where diversity is the norm and creativity is multiplied. This is a daunting task, but educators must start opening their doors.

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### **About the Author**

**Laura T. Bennett M.Ed.** earned her Bachelor of Arts in History from University of Massachusetts Amherst and a Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from University of Massachusetts Lowell. She is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Education in K-12 Leadership at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Laura is serving her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as an elementary school teacher at A.B. Consentino School in Haverhill, Massachusetts. Previously, she spent 12 years as an elementary school teacher in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Laura loves teaching and learning with her students. She thinks the greatest gift a teacher can give is to ignite the spark to lifelong learning.

## *I used to think... Now I think*

Desiree Casian, M. Ed.

I preface my ideas and thoughts with the acknowledgement of my relative greenness as a teacher. The education I received was fairly progressive in its philosophies of teaching practices. I was certain that everything I was taught was the truth. I thought schools in Vermont and New Hampshire would be the same for a teacher. I thought the law was the law, and regardless it had to be followed. It never occurred to me that I would be a special education teacher and it never occurred to me I would not teach high school social studies.

Based on the preparation of my undergraduate program, I believed that all teachers differentiated and knew what it meant to accommodate. I believed that all teachers wanted all students to be in their classrooms. I believed teachers collaborated and assisted each other. I believed my professors knew what I would be facing as a first year teacher. I was wrong. My Vermont professors told me how important the profession of teaching was. They made me believe teachers were held in high regard and that the work I was going to do was believed to be vital. The more I teach the more I realize although my work may be vital the culture I am in does not hold me or the position I am qualified for in high regard, in fact I would argue the opposite. Regardless, I graduated blissfully unaware of what lied ahead.

Prior to graduation I was convinced I would never work in special education. I believed it was where teachers went and never resurfaced. Coming from a preparatory school background, I was certain I wanted to teach high school. I loved high school and all of the traditions, clubs, sports, and independence it allowed students. I had visions of supervising school dances and inspiring high school students to problem solve. I dreamed of teaching freshman social studies and coaching field hockey and ice hockey. I felt special education would limit my choices and not allow me the flexibility I desired. I wanted to be able to coach, teach, and still have time for family. I believed that IEP meetings would interfere with my ability to be a coach and have a family. I considered a variety of methods to avoid taking the course, although I had no issue with special education students, I was determined that I did not want to be involved in the type of education that excluded students.

After graduation in 2010, I was convinced of a variety of things. To start, I thought I was going to be a social studies teacher! It was four months after I graduated when I considered the possibility of becoming a special education teacher. The special education classes that I had so vehemently protested, ended up being the most powerful and rewarding part of my college experience. It started when I worked with a student with fetal alcohol syndrome. She was a sweet 18 year old that dreamed of graduating. She was believed to read at a fifth grade level and I was the chosen one who got to assist her with the completion of her senior project. It was not long into our sessions when I ran out of texts for her to read and went to my college library thinking, "I would read her some of the information out of the book." Soon, I realized she could read much of it on her own. My class was set to end the same day the case manager was finally able to meet

with me. It was then I was told she would never graduate. Crushed, I probed for answers, the student was bright, sweet, and hungry to work. Unfortunately, that is not how the school viewed the situation, it was after this I realized I had to take action. This student had surfaced a passion for special education that I couldn't shake. The college I attended did not offer special education certification and after graduation I realized if special education is what I wanted to teach, I would need my masters.

Prior to taking the graduate education plunge, I wanted to be sure the passion would last so I took a job as a paraprofessional. I had not yet worked with students with profound disabilities and I was concerned my experience working with a high functioning child had shaped my idea of what special education would be. To ensure I was ready for all special education had to offer I took a job as a one on one paraprofessional for a non-verbal student on the autism spectrum. It was immediate love and I started my masters about a week after I took the job.

I thought everything I had learned as an undergrad was the truth, my professors were experts! What had not occurred to me was that they were experts in the literature of progressive education in a liberal state (Hess, 2009). The experts in my undergraduate education were not experts in New Hampshire (Hess, 2009). I was not prepared for teaching or being a paraprofessional in a conservative rural New Hampshire town where classrooms were still separate and communication between teachers and special educator was strained. Communication was so poor it was often mediated by administration and documented separately by individual teachers. Everything I was taught had not happened yet in this school.

Before I became a paraprofessional, I was wholeheartedly convinced everyone participated in inclusion. I came to this conclusion based on the ideas that I had learned through my course work as an undergraduate. This belief was reinforced through the experience I had observing and working with students in Vermont. It did not occur to me at any point inclusion was not the case in all situations. Inclusion allowed children to be able to stay in schools close to home and maintain family ties (Hehir, 2009). It was my understanding students went to class and how they were meant to participate in class was the only question. I was also under the impression the Individual's with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) was law which stated all individuals had the right to participate and have a free and appropriate public education (Hehir, 2009). I was shocked to find there was apparently room for interpretation in the law and teachers preferred to not be bothered if they could help it. I was profoundly confused. It did not occur to me students would not be fully included.

It was not just my undergraduate education that led me to this belief. I attended school with students with disabilities and while I knew others had not, it seemed very distant to me, almost unrealistic. In high school, I had run track with Peter. In elementary school my line-dance partner was Sam. In kinder-basketball, my teammate was Eric. Thinking back I could identify their disabilities but, as a student, they were simply my classmates. In most cases the individuals I knew that did not attend school with students with disabilities had graduated high school long before I was born.

I was taught from a young age that all students would be viewed as having different intelligences; it did not occur to me when I became teacher that others would still believe intelligence was finite (Jewell-Sherman, 2009). I did not believe intelligence could be measured by a standardized test given once a year, nor did I believe the score

indicated how successful a student was or if they were worthy of extra attention or specialized classes.

Most profoundly, I believed that every person in a school building wanted to do what was best for students.

### **Now I think...**

Most profoundly, I believe every person in a school building wants to do what is best for students.

I have yet to meet an exception to that statement. As a new teacher I find teachers resist new ideas because they are afraid of how their choices will affect the education of the children they teach. No teacher I have ever met wants to hurt a child or believe that what they have been teaching has hurt a child's education. Teachers fight change because they want students to succeed.

Teaching takes an exceptional amount of time to master. Once a teacher has mastered their craft they are often asked to change their methodology. This would be like telling a mechanical engineer after working on the same boat design for twelve years to build another boat because new research has surfaced that may or may not be effective. They would also like to inform the mechanical engineer that he is responsible for telling the rest of his crew and their families and convincing them to complete the rebuild with him. While this may seem farfetched to the outside reader it's we ask of our teachers year after year.

I learned quickly special education is not where teachers go and never resurface. Special education is a center of creativity and unique solutions. Special educators are versatile and can become a valued resource for families, teachers, and students. Most importantly, they can work collaboratively with teachers of all subjects with the immense task of making curriculum accessible to all students. Like all teachers they are undervalued, overworked, and underutilized.

Unfortunately, our PISA scores<sup>1</sup> reflect that our schools are no longer servicing our student's needs (Tucker, 2011). The drop in scores represents the lack of innovation and revision American education has undergone in the last 100 years. While many high scoring PISA schools have reformed their practices or had major cultural shifts reflecting positive values in education, the United States has remained largely stagnant in our practices (Tucker, 2011). Finland, Japan, and Shanghai all have unique school organizations which largely are representative of their culture and beliefs (Tucker, 2011). Most importantly these cultures value teachers and education in a way that American culture does not (Tucker, 2011). As a result American teachers are pushed in many directions and forced to participate in teaching practices they know to be counterproductive to their students needs.

I have come to the conclusion that many of the problems I thought existed with education are a cultural issue. Other countries value their teachers and system of education differently than the United States. Finland values their teachers enough to entrust them to make choices with regards to educating students (Tucker, 2011). Shanghai and Japan are cultures that believe teachers and education are the utmost

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<sup>1</sup> The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy. For more information see <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/>

importance (Tucker, 2011). These cultures have also allowed education to reform to meet the needs of their teachers and students. They provide professional development, empowerment, trust, and respect.

Finland believes their teachers are the experts in education (Tucker, 2011). An example how much Finland trusts their teachers is in the de-emphasis of the importance of yearly standardized exams to measure student success (Tucker, 2011). Instead Finland entrusts its teachers to measure students progress using teacher created assessments. Finland also has a cultural belief that schools assist in the well being of all children (Tucker, 2011). To further service the all children and their unique needs Finland's educational system is organized in a way that allows students to take different educational paths (Tucker, 2011). After comprehensive school, students may attend vocational school or upper secondary school (Tucker, 2011). The cultures of Finland and Shanghai empower educators to make the best educational choices for students (Tucker, 2011).

Since 1959 Shanghai has had three major educational movements and reforms (Tucker, 2011). Each of the shifts is aligned with major government economic reform. Shanghai changed and adapted their education because their culture and government believes economic success is based on the education of their people (Tucker, 2011). Interestingly enough through each educational reform Shanghai has also experienced economic growth (Tucker, 2011). One of the most outstanding examples of how Shanghai's education system is different is how it has adapted to become student driven. The ministry of education has allowed for the creation of schools which have an emphasis on student interests such as, math, science, arts, and sports (Tucker, 2011). These schools stand in stark difference to American schools which look relatively similar with extremely few exceptions.

Japan has also experienced educational reform placing education at the hands of educators. A shift made possible by the support provided by Japan's culture which places importance on the group rather than the individual. Japan also supports the whole child and places emphasis on applied intelligence. In the United States intelligence tests are issued with the idea that intelligence is possessed. Japan's culture believes that true intelligence is in the individual's ability to apply their intelligence to do something of value (Tucker, 2011). One of the most observable differences in Japan's education is their cultures belief that doing well is the responsibility of the group. Unlike in the United States Japan does not place the responsibility of academic success on the shoulders of the teacher. Instead it is placed on the teacher to instruct, the student to achieve, and the family to support (Tucker, 2011). Japan also like its Finnish and Chinese counterparts does not test students yearly using standardized exams. Instead they entrust the teachers to monitor student progress and understanding of material.

I was interested to learn how these places do not see the value in repeated testing from an early age. These places do not believe their students are reduced to the numbers on a test. Finland organizes its schools to allow students to choose their educational paths (Tucker, 2011). Shanghai has recognized the ties education has to their economy and has grown exponentially as a result (Tucker, 2011). Japan believes intelligence is measured by a person's ability to apply the knowledge they possess (Tucker, 2011). Each of these countries outscore the United States, yet we do not follow suit.

The more I read the more I understand no educational program in the country prepares people for what they will face as teachers. K-12 Education in the United States is a floundering system. Not because of lack of teacher prep, the growing special education population, or from government regulation. The system is broken because our culture does not value the privilege of receiving an education. School is devalued because it has not met the needs of students for a long time. The lack of change and reform United States schools has faced is a result of our culture refusing change and patronizing the institution for not meeting the needs of its changing constituents. To change our system we must first change how our country views education. Shanghai may be the key, recognizing the link between education and the economy (Tucker, 2011).

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### **About the Author**

**Desiree Casian** is a certified in general special education, as well as secondary social studies. In addition, she is highly qualified in English and has earned a M. Ed. in special education from New England College. Currently she is enrolled in a program of study leading to a doctorate in Educational Leadership K-12 and a second master's degree in teaching the visually impaired. In the future Des' goal is use her skills in education to change how schools are viewed.

## *I Used to Think... but Now I think*

John P. D'Entremont, Social Studies Teacher

I used to think that the teachers were the key to improving schools. As a young educator with only a few years experience in both public and private schools after receiving my masters degree, I would scratch my head as I walked the halls and worked with colleagues. I came across so many colleagues who were inefficient; they were complainers; they were stuck in the way they have always done it even when they had only been doing it for a few years. As Whitaker (2010) calls them, they are “mediocres”. I always felt that teachers needed to change their ways and practices in order to improve schools. I worked as a teacher for seven years before rising to an administrative level after having taught at the same school for five years. After taking an administrative post, I realized fostering a community of stakeholders invested in a shared vision is not easy.

Convincing the “superstar” teachers can be just as difficult as the “mediocres” (Whitaker, 2010). Every school has those model teachers and those that need to improve. Now I believe the key to success in schools does not just lie in the hands of teachers. It has to be an overall team effort including all constituents (Nieto, 2011). Without a shared approach, schools are not going to get anywhere in the United States.

I used to think that being an administrator was rewarding and an opportunity to make a great difference. Being an administrator is not as easy as many teachers think and it can be very unrewarding. Teachers often feel they know what it is like even though they never had to wear those shoes so to speak. I never really felt it mattered who the administrator was in a school because I thought if they really wanted to they could make a difference and changes with or without administrative support. The old adage of creative insubordination comes to mind as teachers have the ability to make a difference when that door is closed and the mandates from the top cannot sneak in any longer. As an administrator, I tried to “fix” those colleagues that were inefficient, complaining, and stuck in their ways. One example of this was when I would offer teachers the opportunity to observe me teach to observe how technology was used in the classroom to get them on board with new technology issues. These invitees were the “mediocres” so to speak and, of course, only the “superstars” came. Unfortunately, not all teachers can be “fixed” by an administrator and I learned this was the wrong approach. I learned and do believe now, however, that teachers can “fix” other teachers. The superstars that Whitaker (2010) refers to are those people that need to bring others along. Just like a team approach working with students, it requires a team approach with adults. It requires buy-in, trust, and willingness by all to move a school in a particular direction.

I have always thought that education is too complicated in this country. Whether it is public or private school in all different places in the country, there are a vast number of differences. The way things happen in New Hampshire are quite different than in Massachusetts. The way things happen in New Hampshire private schools is different from Massachusetts’s private schools and the same goes for public schools across the nation. I have often felt that these differences are the downfall of education. The lack of sameness makes it difficult for educators and schools are what educators were told as the

Common Core came to be. Students transitioning in and out of schools and curriculum that varies so much makes it impossible at times for educators was another support of the Common Core. I do not feel this way any longer. The uniqueness to the education system in the United States is the beauty of our system. I have learned this from my time at two very different and unique independent schools. Who can serve children better than their own communities? Local control is something that makes us unique, especially in New Hampshire. We just need to find ways to make this local control even more powerful for the future of public education.

I always thought that the people who know best how to educate students are the people that work with those students every day. I have not experienced a top down approach that has worked yet in my career and maybe one day I will. When that happens, I will think differently. But for now, I still believe that leaving teachers, schools, districts, and states in charge of education makes much more sense than involving the federal government. I understand from a funding perspective that there needs to be accountability as to where money goes. The federal government must trust states to disperse those monies in an appropriate way and follow up accordingly. One does not have to travel far from New Hampshire to realize that New Hampshire has one of those systems that some believe is good and others not. The state allows the locales the power to choose how to educate the children in their communities. Other states have gone away from this idea and are paying the price following the top down accountability federal approach. Like New Hampshire, there are systems around the world that have similarities.

Having gone to school in a foreign country for a while, I always thought that other countries had it so much better when it came to education. The media and many authors like Pasi Sahlberg and Andy Hargreaves (2011) who wrote about Finland only spurred these feelings on more. It can be disheartening when one sees better results in another country or when we read about our own issues and misfortunes in education. Ironically, I went to middle school for a while in Finland. Then I realized that culture has a lot to do with it. The US education system has a culture shock problem more than anything else. Instead of looking outside and trying to emulate others, we need to look inside and come up with creative ways that work for us to fix what is broken. It does not make sense to try to pull in a socialized system for example in a country as vast and large as this one. One of the basic principles of the Constitution known as Federalism will stop it every time. The separation of powers between the federal government and state governments is not new in the United States and built into our culture. We must keep that in mind whenever we consider reforming education. The United States is not going to turn into Finland in regard to education because the Finns have a different culture than the United States (Schwartz & Mehta, 2011).

I believe now, education and the power to educate must rest in the hands of states and not the federal government. States need to listen to the various localities and allow them to set goals and objectives for themselves. It is perfectly OK if one state like New Hampshire is different from Massachusetts. That is acceptable and no different from two bordering European nations. I arrive at this conclusion from my years of experience in private education. Having worked at two very different independent schools, one an all boys athletic school and another a coeducational arts-oriented school, I noticed that the schools had their own beliefs in how to educate and provided a strong program for their

students even though they were only geographically two hours apart. The power these schools had for these students created ideal learning environments for the students they served. The power to educate must remain with educators that work closest and know the children in their classrooms and schools.

The private school world is a fragment of the K-12 educational landscape, but it demonstrates the beauty of the education system in the United States. This is similar to Jewell-Sherman's (2011) there is hope in the possible. In America, people do have choice when it comes to education and those choices do not necessarily exist elsewhere in places such as Finland. For Finns, private education does not work culturally. For America, it has. What private education demonstrates to me is the power of education when a teacher or school has the autonomy to educate how they feel they should. When parents are making that choice of schools, they are buying-in and trust the teacher or school. Trust is key like Meier (2011) says and right now trust is hurting schools. It is going to take putting trust in the people who are trained to educate the children in their care. I now believe that allowing all schools in this country the power to do this will ultimately improve our educational system overall.

As I continue to ponder how to "fix" the system, I harken back to my notion of "fixing" teachers. Administrators can't "fix" teachers and only a team approach will. The community must support change and culture needs to shift both in and out of school. Teachers need to want the change and leaders need to be able to foster the change and advocate for it within and outside the community. Without this, no change will ever happen. But imagine the possibility if all schools were given the power and freedom to educate how they saw fit just like a private school.

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### **About the Author**

**John P. D'Entremont** is a second-year doctoral student at New England College in the K-12 Leadership program in Henniker, NH. He is a former teacher and administrator of private schools and is currently a public school social studies teacher in Lebanon, NH. John is most interested in how leaders build trusting adult communities in both public and private schools. He believes that public and private schools can learn from each other in regard to best leadership practices.

## *I Used to Think...Now I Think...*

Joanne Duncan, M.Ed.  
Elementary Teacher

I remember the highlight of my undergraduate work was soaking up as much of the constructivist theory I could get from reading Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. I remember savoring the lectures of my wise professors and dreaming that one day, I might have a fraction of their wisdom. I used to think, “Surely these ideas are, and forever will be, enough to motivate teachers and students.” My naivety never allowed me to imagine that constructivist learning would have to compete with politics. My teaching career began in rural North Dakota, and I firmly believed that passionate teachers were at the top of the food chain! What else did I need besides my love for learning; wouldn’t this bursting fervor for teaching magically engage my students? I used to think that my ideas and perspectives made the most sense, and that my thinking would not change over time. I now know that change is inevitable, and that one’s mindset must be open to new ideas.

I once thought that rumors of vast discrepancies between rural, urban, and suburban schools were truly just rumors. Then, I experienced working in all three types of settings from rural North Dakota, to urban and very ethnic Hawaii, to my present suburban New Hampshire school. I couldn’t have imagined when my career began that in America; we would leave so many children behind. Now because of my varied teaching experiences, I understand that many factors affect the reality that inequities do exist in our public schools across this great nation. I now realize that change takes time and time is something discouraged by politicians. Systemic change needs to be adopted in a calm and patient manner. Unfortunately, rapid change has become commonplace in many school districts and such rapid change often results in employees feeling powerless. These teachers have learned from experience that external forces will initiate change despite requests for reconsideration, and therefore, motivation to excel is inhibited (Kotter, 2011).

Today, because of my innate desire to understand myself as well as the profession of teaching better, I know that we don’t have to leave children behind. We have global partners in education that we can model some of our practices against, and America should wisely “cherry-pick” from these models. For example, we might examine Finland’s practice that places emphasis on student mindfulness, innovation, and entrepreneurship and seek to redesign parts of our curriculum to honor these worthy traits. Likewise, we can also strive to recruit and retain a high-quality teaching force. Lastly, we can analyze the benefits our competing counterparts such as Finland and China place on teacher training. We must afford our teachers time during the school day to collaborate with one another and then evaluate best instructional practices for students (Schwartz & Meta, 2014, p. 73).

During the early years of my teaching career, I used to think that rigorous teaching standards had no place in public education as standards only served one

purpose; to control the teacher's daily schedule. I also thought that innate teaching ability did not warrant professional training in pedagogic skill development. I once believed that each teacher worked alone and there wasn't a need for collaboration. I used to believe that change was only necessary for poorly performing schools or poorly performing teachers. It is clear now that we can have both high standards and relevant, creative instructional practices. I now endorse warranted visionary change as a necessary component of forward progress (Gardner, 2011). I now stand firm in my philosophy that educators must advocate confidently and courageously for children with regards to instituting best practices within the classroom (Chip Wood, personal communication, November 18, 2014).

I once thought that full inclusion was the only way to best teach to the needs of special education students. I still believe when all necessary and sensible service delivery criteria are in place, full inclusion is the best choice as the benefits to both special needs students and the general education students are numerous (Hehir, 2011). However, I also used to think that all school districts appropriated monies into essential and functional service delivery needs in order to best meet the ethical standards for all students to ensure success. Now I think politics and money play much more of a role in decisions of special education funding than does the so-called visionary belief statements of many districts. I now see that when monies are not sensibly distributed and qualified staffing requirements do not meet the needs for special education students, full inclusion practices often result in a lose-lose situation for all children within the classroom. Common sense, integrity, and adherence to reasonable accommodations must be implemented to help students with special learning needs grow academically and socially as well as ensure a conducive learning environment for all children.

I now believe that a team of vested stakeholders must decide a student's special education needs. I now realize that many schools are reluctant to accept the truths that they are barely skimming the surface of what is a best practice in the classroom. My current thinking believes that we must honor the learning environment for all children, and just as children with special needs have rights, so do all children. I understand that my revelation might be construed as discriminatory and exclusive, yet nothing could be further from the truth. I support the research that agrees with a full inclusion model, however, we cannot afford to hide behind the facade of political pressure and pretend that best practices are being instituted at school. If we aren't practicing what we preach, then basically, we are playing Russian roulette with children's lives.

I used to think teachers worked for their principals and students worked for their teachers. Clearly, I now know that this is an upside down view of how to best teach and learn. Teachers and students need to be guided and mentored, not controlled and scrutinized. I now understand the difference between managerial leaders and transformational leaders (Bass, 1999). When a teacher's instructional practices are micromanaged by poor leadership, the result of such tight parameters often results in disengagement, which in turn, transpires into the tone of the classroom. I now understand the freedom that comes from a leadership style that encourages trust and relationships. A few years ago, I thought I had to adhere to all the stringent guidelines necessitated by my school district. Now I know that I must advocate my understanding of cognitive development theory and use the creative teaching gifts I have been afforded in order to engage my students desire to learn. I now know that courage and confidence

far outweigh complacency and this very courage is what frames my leadership style. I now encourage my students to advocate for themselves and be the force that drives their educational success.

I used to think the United States was the top-performing country in education. I believed that our wealth and power as a country somehow propelled us to the top. Now I realize how very wrong my thinking was. I now understand that money and power aren't buying us a better education system. I realize that countries such as Japan, Canada, Finland, and China have approached education reform from a "grass-roots" mindset. These countries have capitalized on the shared vision of their citizens and this cultural support has ignited their government's motivation to work collaboratively with educators (Tucker, 2011).

I used to think I knew exactly what my educational career would look like. Now I have a hunch that my thirst for learning and my appetite for instituting warranted change have prompted my decision to pursue a doctorate degree in education. I once thought that my only influence on change would stem from my position as an elementary teacher. I now appreciate that my sphere of influence is growing, and I must trust in the wisdom that comes from continued learning as well as have faith that my future work will be driven by my continued zest for bettering children's lives.

I used to think that kids would maintain their childhood innocence well into adolescence as my own children did. Unfortunately, I have now accepted that society is setting a double standard for our children because we promote a "hurry up and decide what you want to be when you grow up" approach to their thinking, yet we cry out when their behaviors and thinking are too mature for societal acceptance. Technological advancements, family dynamics, socioeconomic challenges, and our school systems, have for too long pushed inappropriate ideas and practices into a child's life. I now wish for the return of childhood simplicity, but more importantly, I now know that courage and competence, and theory to practice, is my destiny as I continue my life's journey as an educational leader.

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### **About the Author**

**Joanne Duncan** earned her M.Ed. from New England College and currently holds a certification in Elementary Education and Administration. She is a second-year doctoral student at New England College, K-12 Leadership Program. Joanne began her teaching career 14-years ago in rural North Dakota where her mentor taught her the value of holistic teaching. She then moved on to teach in a very urban neighborhood on Oahu, Hawaii. It was this job that solidified for Joanne the need to better understand cognitive development theory and how create a classroom climate which balances academic and social/emotional needs for each student. Currently, Joanne teaches 5<sup>th</sup> grade in a southern New Hampshire public school. Joanne understands her thirst for learning and bettering a child's educational experience has led her to assume various leadership roles throughout her career. After receiving her doctorate degree, Joanne plans to pursue teaching at the college level in hopes of cultivating a new generation of teachers who will go forth and blaze a trail of courage, competence, and theory to practice in America's public schools.

## *I Used to Think....*

Bill Furbush

### *I used to think...*

I used to think school change was about having a good idea and a better way to do something. School change is about getting collaborative groups together, to develop a plan and ways to improve education. I used to think that when people were presented with this great plan it would be easily rolled out as everyone would realize why have we not been doing it this way all along! My view of school change was very simplistic and very naïve.

I remember when I first thought about being a principal. I was motivated a professor during my Master's degree in Education who told me I would be a principal someday. This was before I even had my own classroom, but I always remembered her comment and she was right. I had a strong desire to make change on a larger level than just my classroom. This desire motivated me to continue my education toward my principal's certification even during my first years in the classroom.

As soon as I finished my Master's degree I began the course work for my C.A.G.S in administration. I was only in my second year of teaching and I began this course work. At the time I had what I thought was a bad principal. I questioned why things could not change. Why is it so hard to just make a decision and move forward? I was a rule follower and one not afraid of change. I was ego-centric and thought everyone thought the same way as me. We would change if someone just came out and told us to do it. I have since learned I was wrong and that most don't adapt to change as easily as I do.

I left the classroom after eight years of teaching and went on to become an assistant principal. I made many mistakes! I hadn't learned to develop relationships before moving forward with changes that I promoted. I came from a building where I was a school leader and respected and my ideas were well received. I thought they were well received just because they were great ideas. Now I know the success of those ideas was based on how they were developed and the relationships upon which they were built. The ideas were developed by living the experience with the staff and developing them collaboratively. The ideas were well received because of this shared experience, social capital, and commitment to make a difference.

In my new position I came out way too fast with change ideas. I hadn't taken the time to develop the relationships necessary to implement those changes. I had no social capital to fall back on when I failed. I had not lived the experiences long enough before trying to offer solutions.

### *I now think...*

I now know how important and necessary relationships are to the change process. How important it is to collaboratively develop ideas and solutions. People need to be part of the solution they do not want someone to come in and tell them

how they think it should be done. When leaders come in with the answers it creates more challenges and instead of enlisting the support of others their energy is now opposing the implementation of these ideas. The proposed solutions may be identical to the ones the group comes up with however it is not just about having the right idea or solution. It is just if not more important to think about the investment in those ideas and creating ownership and creating leadership opportunities along the way. This is dependent on building relationships, cultivating others leadership skills, and trusting in the abilities of others.

Once I left that assistant principal position I became the principal of a small K-6 elementary school. This is where I developed the skills to coordinate efforts and implement change. In all my schooling (even organizational change class) you do not gain the experience of navigating the change process or really have any clue how positive change happens. I used to think changing teacher or building practices was as simple as stating this is what we are going to do. I have since learned in addition to building relationships I needed to learn a great deal of skill to implement school change, to change old practices and habits, and to lead a building.

I now consider myself a facilitator of ideas and the conductor of the vision. I have learned to clear the path for others who are willing and able to bring great ideas to life. I give them energy and support to make those ideas happen. I have learned I do not need to own those ideas or take full control of them. I have also learned that I have the responsibility to ensure that all these ideas compliment the vision and direction of the school and that is when I am the conductor. Sometimes great ideas are too early or even counter productive to other initiatives that are happening. It is necessary to coordinate these ideas and efforts if the vision implementation is to be a success, this lesson can only be learned by living it and having failures along the way.

Changing everyday practices is never as easy as the principal telling people to do it. Teacher buy in is crucial and the more teachers you can convince this is the right thing to do and you cultivate their desire to change themselves is when you have the most success. Someone once said, "I am always a leader first, but at times I have to be the boss." This phrase guides my philosophy of school change. Lead and develop relationships, create the solutions together and create a shared vested interest and shared responsibility for success (or failure) of those ideas. Inspire others and win them over that this is the right thing to do and we need to do it for the students.

When you have led all those that are willing to be led there does come a time to say to those who refuse to come along, this is what we agreed upon and we all are doing it and hold them accountable for their actions because those actions destroy the vision and the culture of the building. It encourages others to continue to be their own islands and breeds more dissent. Schools are much more successful the fewer islands we have. Address people with respect and treat them fairly and if the need arises hold them accountable. Others will respect you for it and thank you for fulfilling your responsibility. Chances are others (teachers) did not approve of their non-collaborative behavior either and respect your efforts. This is also the only way to ensure the vision is implemented by everyone.

### **About the Author**

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## *I used to think...Now I think...*

Kelley Gangi, Program Director, Teaching and Learning Alliance

### *I used to think...*

Twenty-one years ago, I began my career as a middle school teacher in the New York City Public Schools. In the first year, I thought deeply about the ways in which I could impact the forty-one inner city children in my class. Many had family members with AIDS, fathers in jail, and little money for new clothes as they started middle school in East Elmhurst. I thought then the most important contributions I could make were compassion, persistence, and camaraderie. After all, I was also a school alumnus. Over time, my teaching career evolved into an administrative role. In my thirteen years as an administrator, I continued to think profoundly about impact. However, a culture of accountability, high-stakes measures, and rapid-fire reform changed my thinking. Nurturing and fellowship no longer dominated my decision-making. I spent less time with children and more time isolated with data, research, manuals, and webinars. As an administrator, I used to think that systemic reform was the only path to meaningful change. For example, I coordinated a rapid transition from traditional service provision to full-fledged RTI across nine grade levels in two years. I focused on quick transformation rather than persistent evolution. This was evidenced by a hasty two-year conversion from basal readers to balanced literacy in eight elementary schools spanning five towns. I traded community decision-making for top-down mandates implementing new math curriculum, wide-scale technology initiatives, broad professional development offerings, and special education restructuring with impunity. As an administrator, I used to think “the state” was the driver for meaningful improvement.

In my final year as a district administrator, I had the great fortune of connecting with a handful of other school leaders who were beginning to tire of this way of thinking. And then my perceptions changed. But first...

### *Unforeseen circumstances came about...*

An important event caused a gradual surge of revised thinking in the most recent years of my career. The incident was a traumatic introduction to fiscal crisis and the second a grave insight to the flawed system of educational hierarchy. The tide began to shift during my role as Director of Curriculum in the largest regional school district in Massachusetts. There my role, along with the other “directors,” was not defined as “assistant superintendent” in the deliberate attempt to avoid direct supervision by a twenty-two-member school committee. This unwieldy governing body was highly detached from the reality of schoolhouses and perpetually held at bay by a skilled superintendent. The state funding formula was robbing regional districts of equitable subsidy, common core was bearing down on classrooms, and cuts were looming despite growing educational demands. Embattled factions rallied at school committee meetings to argue the value of string instruments, custodians, and moderate to vigorous physical activity levels in school gymnasiums. It was a quiet day in July of 2012 when the deluge burst through.

While most central staffers spent the week scattered across their vacation destinations, the business manager was propping his letter of resignation on the superintendent's keyboard. We took turns reading the letter when we returned. Staring in disbelief, we read the account of the spreadsheet errors, the resulting multi-million dollar shortfall, and his hasty departure to Colorado. A bombshell shortfall of that magnitude quickly decimated years of strategic initiatives, tactical hires, grant allocations, and proposed enhancements for the current fiscal year. With just weeks to go before opening schools, we slashed millions in programming to cover the deficit and faced angry mobs at school committee meetings. A local paper, *The Telegram and Gazette*, captured public sentiment in the October 4, 2012 headline, "\$2.7M snafu irks W--- Regional School District towns." Some committee members demanded a forensic investigation despite clear evidence of careless spreadsheet miscalculations. A surprisingly fragile system was about to crumble.

In the unfolding year, we took turns buying sandwiches to feed our embattled and exhausted superintendent, proposed further cuts, tried our best to raise moral in our schools, and rebuffed politically charged accusations from a deeply fractured school committee. In the end, we held tight to high educational standards, refusing to cut classroom teachers. But the costs were massive. We lost all instructional coaches, one principal, instructional supplies left by vendors in school loading docks, and many other sacrifices. Ultimately, almost all central staffers would be gone by the end of the year after doing their best to stabilize programs and restore financial solvency. I was hopeful as I left for an assistant superintendent position in a bucolic western Massachusetts town.

My short time in this western Massachusetts district assured me of the second pivotal realization of my career. Classroom teachers and school principals worked collaboratively and diligently in this district. Students excelled and standardized test scores were holding at positive levels. My charge, among other goals, was to address the persistent achievement lag among high needs populations. In a district with substantial funding, highly committed educators, a brand new state of the art high school, and technology spilling from every classroom doorway, this seemed a compelling and achievable goal. Unfortunately, I soon realized I was powerless, even here, to effect change from within. The district was an arena for politics, stoking unabashed inequities, inefficiencies, and unethical behavior. The disconnect between the leadership and the schools they were meant to govern was vast. The system was humming along serving adults rather than children. I could not be an accomplice.

As a former teacher and curriculum coordinator, I used to think that education was a place where students were at the center of all decisions. Unfortunately, in my roles as director and assistant superintendent, I realized that students were often the last thought. The central office distance from "the classroom" contributed to this. The influence of school committee members had an even greater impact. Few school committee members were educators in districts where I spent my career. Interests were political or personal to leverage a whole system for the adults, rather than the children.

Now I think the system is broken beyond repair.

***Now I think...***

While this story has a lot of gloom and doom, my experiences did wake me to the reality of a new possibility. Perhaps the solution to better schools isn't found within the systems themselves. Perhaps the communities outside the district "walls" hold the power

to disrupt the linear, dysfunctional nature of leadership. In his work *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform* (2011), Michael Fullan identifies the endemic problem: the “wrong drivers” lead to reforms and management in our schools. Specifically, Fullan identifies these malefactors as misuse of accountability measures to punish schools, principals, and teachers, promoting individualized governance strategy rather than collaborative decision-making and leadership, using technology to distract from and mask real instructional issues, and “fragmented strategies” that fail to integrate the components of the system. These faulty drivers were sadly evident in the two systems in which I spent the last eight years of my career. Through my work at a nonprofit reform partner to districts, I see application of erroneous drivers as pandemic.

That realization makes two truths evident to me. First, meaningful change, if it is to come to schools, must emanate from outside district walls. Community organizations, nonprofits, donors, and higher education institutions must drive the changes our students need. Second, the linear form of leadership existing within districts is ineffective. Organizations with \$80 million dollar operating budgets cannot have one person managing the books alone. Institutions with thousands of students, hundreds of employees, and dozens of complex mandates, each requiring application of in-depth scientific research, cannot have stay-at-home moms, landscapers, recent high school graduates, and paralegals governing educational policy.

Now I think principals, teachers, and students must exert the influence over policy, curricular choices, professional learning opportunities, and areas of targeted expenditure. Schools must partner with organizations across industries to uncover improved practices for fiscal management, problem solving, and leadership development. Nonprofits, community organizations, and even corporate entities have much to offer districts in these areas. Additionally, districts must study models for decentralizing leadership and decision making so that a single individual can no longer have the power to bring down a whole system, whether through negligence or impropriety. In *Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World’s Leading Systems*, Marc Tucker describes the decentralized nature of the Canadian educational system and the resulting success of this model. While his account describes localized control over decision-making on a grand scale, the same benefits can be seen by localized decision making in district schools.

The decentralized approach, with effective partnership and research-supported rationale, can lead to highly effective drivers in our schools. Fullan describes effective drivers as those that “foster intrinsic motivation of teachers,” “engage educators and students in continuous improvement,” “inspire collective or team work,” and impact “all teachers and students,” not just those on intermittent committees or in select student populations. In *Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, Louis, Leithwood, and Wahlstrom (2010) describe this collective approach to leadership as “participative leadership” through which leadership is shared among groups of stakeholders. In my new role beyond district walls, I can see the clear need for these reforms. I used to think that a few should hold the power and determine what was best for many. Now I think that many, including those looking in from outside, are key to leverage the change for which our students, teachers, and principals impatiently wait.

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## About the Author

**Kelley Gangi** spent twenty years of her career in public education having served as a classroom teacher, curriculum coordinator, director of curriculum, and assistant superintendent in urban, suburban, and rural school districts in New York and Massachusetts. Currently, Kelley is Program Director for Teaching and Learning Alliance, a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization of master K-12 educators who provide transformative in-school coaching and leadership training at primary and secondary schools throughout New England. In addition, Kelley is the co-founder of TeachPoint, a robust educator evaluation software solution now used by 54,000 educators in nearly 2000 schools across the United States. Kelley earned National Board Certification at the middle school level, holds a master's degree in reading, and is a second-year doctoral student in the K-12 Educational Leadership program at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire.

## *I Used to Think . . . And Now I Think . . .*

Austin E. Garofalo, Principal  
Gilbert H. Hood Middle School, Derry, New Hampshire

I used to think our education system did not need to change, and now I think just about everything I used to believe was right with education, has to change. I used to think I could change the world for the better, but when I entered the world of education as a teacher in the fall of 1980 I did not think anything needed to change. I had been very successful in our education system, some people I knew had been extremely successful, some had struggled to be successful, and others were not successful at all. As far as I was concerned this was the way education had always been, always would be, and how the education system should work. It was the age-old industrial model of sorting, working perfectly well to provide our society with unskilled laborers, military service personnel, manufacturers, skilled laborers, management personnel, teachers, and highly skilled doctors, lawyers, and entrepreneurs.

Now I realize everyone has the right to be able to succeed in our education system and in our schools, and the age-old industrial model of sorting must finally be abolished . . . forever. Larry Cuban (2012) tells us “the United States has a three-tiered system of schooling based on performance and socioeconomic status” (p. 27). I agree and would take this a step further to say our schools and many teachers have this same sorting system. In my earlier years of schooling and then when I first became a teacher I knew certain kids who I thought were just not suited for our education system. They were sorted out into vocational departments or schools, special education rooms or special schools, and all sorts of remedial rooms, programs, or schools. I still believe we need these options, but only to provide choice or as a short-term, flexibly grouped intervention for the students who might need different supports.

In the beginning of my career I believed there were students who are not suited for education, and now I realize our education system is not suited for them. I used to think everyone could learn, but I believed that each person had a certain finite ability, which is why like Gardner (2012) I had “the notion that there is one “best way” to educate everyone” (p. 42). I now realize there are all types of smart people, many different learning styles, and the need for teachers to adapt to the learning needs of their students (Gardner 1993, 2012). I knew people didn’t learn at the same pace, but I thought there were those that “got it,” those that got the “gist”, and those that never got it. Thanks to *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching: A Framework for the Gradual Release of Responsibility* (Fisher & Frey, 2008) and classroom and school-wide strategies of differentiated instruction, interventions, and flexible grouping, I now understand that everyone can eventually learn anything (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Tomlinson, 2014).

It seemed there were some kids too smart for our schools who just cruised along barely being challenged and getting straight As just for being in the classroom, and then moving on to the real education system predominately made up of private schools and

prestigious colleges. Most of us learned how to play school very well, or as Littky (2012) puts it, “I played the game and got straight A’s; I knew I wasn’t really learning, but I was too busy with the game to figure out what to do about it” (p. 102). There were other students who just did not do school, either because they could not do school or they did not want to do school. I also agree with the change of heart Gardner (2012) had when he states “education . . . was directed toward selection, (but now) we want to educate the entire population in its glorious diversity” (p. 48).

I used to think curiosity and creativity were a part of being young, and as children grew these characteristics dissipated. In contrast to each other, as children became older I saw an increase in challenges of authority and a decrease in levels of motivation for schooling. Now I realize that over time our education system robs many students of their natural curiosity and creativity, and some students begin to act out or become disenfranchised. This is due to boredom and having no connection to the education system and the people in that system (Azzam, 2009). I used to be comfortable with teachers being the experts and delivering knowledge to students who were just expected to learn it, but I did not realize then how many of these “expert” teachers were more concerned with what makes their own job easier as compared to what is in the best interest of the students (Elmore, 2012; Hess, 2012). Now I see the teacher as a facilitator of learning, whose main responsibility is to do whatever it takes to make sure each and every student is able to learn (Marzano, 2007).

This starts with caring for each child, forming positive relationships, and providing choice for students so they become engaged in the learning process. Through the development of a professional adult culture, a school climate is produced that invites all students to participate and promotes a feeling of belonging (Preble & Gordon, 2011). Students and teachers should want to come to school and work, and it is when we treat all people with dignity and respect that this can be accomplished. I often tell students that more important than classroom learning is the lessons they learn about life. Teachers and other staff members are the role models for learning in this system, which encompasses learning in both the content knowledge as well as in life skills (Duckworth, Dweck, 2006; Tough, 2012).

I used to think curriculum was the most important factor related to student achievement, and like the actor working with an outstanding script, greatness would automatically occur. Now I know that teachers have the greatest effect on student achievement, and therefore quality teachers must be educated, hired, and developed for the benefit of all students. The idea that anyone can be a great teacher is simply not reality (Simon, 2012). Teachers need strong knowledge in what they teach and about the child development of the age group they teach (Ravitch, 2010). The number one role of administrators is to support the teaching and learning process with research-based and targeted professional development, and school board members should assist the administration in this effort. Parents should be welcome in our schools and they should have a role in the decision-making process. Partnerships should be established so civic and business leaders become involved in the education of the children in the community. First and foremost, education should service the students. We need to listen to their wants, meet their needs, and remember that it is for their learning that the entire education system exists (Jewell-Sherman, 2012).

I used to think special education students were better served by being in their own room with other students of their same mental capacity, and now I think the majority of students should be included into the regular education population and classrooms as much as possible. When I went to school ~50 years ago and when I started teaching ~35 years ago, I understood why kids were separated into levels according to age, ability, and their own overall capacity to learn. Why would someone who struggles to learn ever want to be in with much smarter kids? Why should we hold back smarter kids while we try to get other kids caught up to where the smarter kids were? My high school had honors, “A” level, “B” level, “C” level, and remediation level so everyone was with students who were at the same level. Again, it was a sorting process, and I believed education was great at doing this and it was what education was supposed to do.

I used to think students should be sorted and separated into different classroom levels, different schools, and even out of district placements, and now I think this practice can often be archaic and sometimes even barbaric. Thomas Hehir (2012) says children should stay within the district, should attend their neighborhood school, and should be included in regular classrooms. He goes on to list the benefits of this type of inclusion by stating it “enables the children to be with their natural supports, . . . provides them with greater opportunities to meet new friends within their community, . . . reduces the burden on families, . . . demonstrates disability is part of life, . . . (and reduces) costs” (p. 57). To make this work well, though, attention must be given to making sure that this inclusion does not create a different type of isolation for these students.

Many children struggle with one or more disabilities and more and more children enter our world with disadvantages of poverty, lower class, and a poor family structure (Sawhill, 2006). I believe education should provide opportunities to produce adults with the ability to apply their knowledge and understanding to function in the world in which they live. This cannot be accomplished with a one size fits all industrial age approach to education. The achievement gap is often evident from birth, but definitely develops to the greatest extent in the early years prior to entering the public school system. Therefore, educators must reach out in a variety of ways to positively parents and very young children with a focus on closing the gaps for all students (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2011; Haberman, 1995; Payne, 1996).

I used to think American schools were part of an equal opportunity education system and everyone had the same chance to succeed, and now I think American schools were created for the wealthy and the privileged and they need to change dramatically to include all students equally. At first I believed it did not matter where you were from or what your background was, because everyone was accepted into the ranks of public schools. Free and appropriate education was offered to all children no matter what their race was, what religious beliefs they had, what their ethnic background was, and how much money they had. Teachers taught the curriculum to every child so each student had an equal chance to master the same information. According to Deborah Jewell-Sherman (2012), “A stellar public school system, while still a distant reality, is bedrock to the realization of the best tenets of democracy” (p. 87). I agree with this and with the idea that our schools still have a long way to go to fulfill this purpose. This means schools need to be more democratic by servicing the needs of ALL students. In contrast to this need for a more democratic environment, Richard Elmore (2012) states, “Currently we live in a political, social, intellectual, and cultural environment that seems to value hard

ideological boundaries and fixed truths” (p. 2). Hopefully this will change in our society and likewise in our schools.

My original belief was the differences in the amount of effort a student put forth was the main reason differences emerged in student achievement outcomes. In other words, it was only dependent upon student effort or lack of effort. There were definitely smart students, average students, and not so smart students, but I believed it was mainly due to how much effort each individual student put forth. Low achievement levels were the fault of students who did not take school seriously and often didn't care. Parents who cared about school prepared their children for school with high expectations, while parents who couldn't care less often had children who felt the same way. Teachers worked with the students who wanted to work and tolerated the students who spent their time goofing off. The teachers taught the material and it was up to the students to decide if they wanted to learn it. I still believe students have a role in their education, but I have changed my mind about it all being up to the student. Beverly Hall (2012) believes a change is necessary, but she indicates “educating students who come to school from challenging environments will never be an easy endeavor and improvement must be evolving and constant” (p. 56). I was not alone in these beliefs, and the problem is there are many educators who still hold onto these beliefs. It is time to own up to our responsibility to educate all children, and to understand that first we need to recognize that we need to change and must be willing to change. Until we recognize that fact, we cannot expect the education system as a whole to have any type of positive and sustainable change.

I used to think that by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our education system would be back on top of the world, but of course that is not the case. Now that we are approaching the middle of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is time to make sure our education system is responsive to 21<sup>st</sup> century students. We need to move away from the Carnegie Unit, our industrial system based on time, and a reliance on classrooms as the only means of delivering instruction. Bramante and Colby (2012) emphasize the need to utilize mastery of competencies to determine student achievement as compared to simply an arbitrary grade in a class, and they discuss the idea of learning “anytime, anyplace, anyhow, (and at) any pace” (p. 57). Compared to a grade, specific teacher feedback in a timely manner is a much more beneficial means to report progress to students and parents (Barnes, 2013). Grades need to be competency-based and evaluated by rubrics so the disproportionate and detrimental “zero” in the antiquated 100-point scale will once and for all be abolished (Wormeli, 2006).

I used to think our education system did not need to change, and now I think just about everything I used to believe was right with education, has to change. I have come clean about my old ways of thinking about our public education system in America, and it pains me to admit many of those former beliefs. I do have high hopes though, because if someone like me with such strong opinions can change, there is hope for so many other educators in America today. I used to think our education system was never going to change, and now I know it can change, I know it slowly is changing, and I know it will have positive and sustainable change that will restore our pride in the American public education system.

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### **About the Author**

**Austin E. Garofalo, C.A.G.S.**, earned a Bachelor of Science in Physical Education and a Masters of Education in Guidance and Counseling from Springfield College, and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in Leadership and Administration from Fitchburg State University. He is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Education in K-12 Leadership at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire. Austin is serving his 10<sup>th</sup> year as Principal of Gilbert H. Hood Middle School in Derry, New Hampshire, after one year as Assistant Principal and four years in Salem, New Hampshire as a high school Assistant Principal. Previously, he spent nine years as a special educator at Pinkerton Academy. He began his career as a physical education teacher in Exeter, New Hampshire. Austin is on the Executive Board of the New Hampshire Association of School Principals (NHASP), currently as President Elect, and President for the 2015-2016 school year, followed by one year as Past President in 2016-2017. Prior to his 15 years with NHASP, he spent seven years on the Board of Directors of New Hampshire Partners In Education, with two terms as their President. The topic of Austin's dissertation is student motivation with a focus on middle school, and the title is *Teaching Student Motivational Character Competencies to Middle School Students*. The research study looks to determine if the teaching of the character competencies of growth mindset and grit in advisory can improve a student's growth mindset, grit, or both, and to see if a causal effect of improving student motivation in the classroom exists.

## *I used to think...now I think...*

Candace R. Harrison

I used to think that private schools afforded better educational opportunities than public school did. As a student of Catholic schools (for the purposes of religious education), I thought that I was exposed to richer and more relevant content than my neighborhood friends who seldom had homework and were using textbooks years behind me. None of them were learning to speak French fluently, none wore uniforms, and none appreciated religion quite like I did either. Within my neighborhood, I thought I was going to be smarter than my peers. Yet at school, I was just a blond haired girl in the third row. Not realizing that I should have had the sense of some individuality and independence, I was the perfect sheep in the flock.

Before my children were born I had already decided that they would attend a private school. Different than my parent's thinking, the intent was not necessarily to promote religious instruction, but rather, my philosophy was that private schools had something big that public schools did not. That was, private schools offered a pool of parents who truly cared about their children's education. In other words, all (well most) of the children did their homework every night, they were all tucked in warm beds at night with a story read and a full belly. Hearty breakfasts were served with love every morning and kids came to school with hats and mittens- they came to school ready to learn. And learn they did. The teachers were able to take the material and shoot it off like rockets and all (well most) of the kids were flying along. My theory was that if parents are willing and able to care about their child's education, half of the battle had been fought and won. My children were destined for private schools. That was until my son, the youngest reached third grade.

My daughter, like many children, was on or before target in every developmental stage of her growth, spoke in sentences before two and continued on a path of social, emotional, and academic success throughout her school career. The Catholic school she attended was almost perfect for her (she hated the uniforms by 6<sup>th</sup> grade). My son, on the other hand, born at less than 4lbs and delivered at 28 weeks in July had to fight from the beginning. Eventually catching up and reaching every milestone, he was less mature than his peers by the age of 8. He too, attended private school, but eventually was overwhelmed with the demands. He couldn't keep up with the "flock" any longer. Private school was not for him.

Private versus public, it's a debate that is boiling through living rooms across the country. There are many advantages of both private and public schools, yet it is important to think of the stakeholder, the child to determine which is best. No longer to I believe that private schools are the best for every child. Now more than ever, I have come to appreciate the advantages of public schools.

One of the advantages of private schools is that because they do not receive funding from the local or federal government, they are not required to follow rules made by policymakers. Leaders of these institutions are able to use any curriculum

design that they prefer. They are often able to provide a more challenging curriculum, which sometimes results in higher standards for students. They can also offer specialized instruction in some areas.

Another advantage is that class sizes are smaller in private schools. Reason for this are because enrollment is typically (not always) lower due to the high costs for parents associated with private schools. Also, private schools are able to be selective about the students who attend. Once again, because they are not government funded and do not have to follow state and federal guidelines, they are able to turn away unwanted students, including students with special needs, students who do not score high enough on entrance exams, and or students who do not meet other criteria deemed by the school. We can assume that these are the reasons why standardized test scores in reading of eighth grade students in private schools were higher than those of their peers in public schools.

Over the years, doing my research has opened my eyes regarding the many disadvantages of private schools despite their advantages. According to Kelly Wallace (2014) private schools are not required to hire highly qualified teachers or even personnel with a teaching certificate. Many private schools employ educators with an undergraduate degree in any area or with a degree in a specialized area, but not necessarily in teaching. Some private schools do not pay teachers very well, which may or may not lead to less of a commitment from teachers. Furthermore, some private schools do not have the funding to offer professional development opportunities for their teachers, which are needed to promote best practices. Personally, I spent many hours as a parent volunteer in my children's classes. Issues of classroom management were nonexistent, which impressed me, but there were other important things that were noticeably missing: science, technology, and differentiation. When my son, who did not have a learning disability, needed his learning needs met, the school did not have the time or resources to adapt or to differentiate lessons for him. Issues were brought about his lack of ability to keep up with the workload and the only solution that I was given was to put him back into second grade after his third grade year had already started. Our choice was to transfer him to a third grade in a public school and to make a plan with his new teacher to watch his progress closely. It turned out that my son was kept back in third grade, but we were an integral part of the team with the teacher who made that decision. The decision was based on data, observations, and what was best for my son. Later, he graduated from the University of New Hampshire (UNH) on the dean's list, ready to take the world on.

Public schools come with advantages of their own as I learned first hand by sending my son to a public school beginning in third grade, and later learned for my self as a public school educator. The guidelines imposed by state and federal mandates are in the best interest of the children. Most recently, accountability at state and local levels are required for educators. School districts are now required to provide more instruction and interventions to help prevent enrollment in special education. Response to Intervention (RTI) has gained momentum as a screening tool for students who are at risk. Special needs students are expected to take responsibility for their behavior and are subject to the same rules as the rest of the students. In 1990, IDEA (Individuals with Education Disabilities Act) was revised.

Additions include students to be included in state and national assessments, inclusion (Least Restrictive Environment, LRE) and regular classroom teachers now required to take part in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) team (US Department of Education, 2004).

A research study conducted by Stanford Social Innovation Review found that public school students performed higher in math. “That is, contrary to the dominant thinking on this issue, the data show that the more regulated public school sector embraces more innovative and effective professional practices, while independent schools often use their greater autonomy to avoid such reforms, leading to curricular stagnation (Lubienski, 2000).” Public schools don’t charge tuition, while private schools do. There are many other advantages of public schools that include the fact that public schools usually provide transportation for students who live more than a few blocks away, whereas private schools usually do not. Consistent with research results, with ninety percent of all American children in public school, public education is a uniting element and can be seen as an important factor in our democratic way of life. Because public school education now includes magnet schools and charter schools, as well as traditional public schools, there are - right within the public education system - choices that have many of the features of education that used only to be attainable in private schools. Furthermore, as a result, public school teachers may, in some cases, be better qualified than private school teachers. Also, because pay for public school teachers is overall better than pay for private school teachers, (though this differs by school) better qualified teachers may be drawn to teaching in public schools.

In conclusion, I believe that public schools are by far, better able to provide for today’s 21st century learner. My beliefs are just on a whim however, it is clear to see that research backs up my understandings so I say this with sound confidence and from both personal and professional experience.

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### About the Author

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# *The Path Less Traveled*

Michael Herrington

Unlike most of my colleagues, my career in education started prior to my formal education in the subject. Years prior to entering a school in a professional capacity, I had been talked out of perusing an education degree. After college, where I completed a bachelor's degree in Fine Art, I was unfulfilled professionally and emotionally lost. At this time, I had moved to New Hampshire and was providing day services for adults with mental disabilities and living with and caring for a handicapped adult at night. I began to rethink about entering the teaching profession.

Wary of going back to school for another degree that I would not use, I decided to take a job as a paraprofessional in behavioral collaborative at a local school district. In this way I could see if this was a viable career path for me and minimize my financial risk and worries. In the beginning of my career, I had no concept of educational theory, let alone purpose and application. My professional beliefs about learning were based solely on my previous personal experiences and what I could pull from observing teachers in the classroom.

My first year as a paraprofessional, I used to think that all levels of education held value to everyone. My unarticulated belief at this time was education for education's sake. I remember being surprised when I heard stories about parents that seemed not to value education, or even in some instances seemed to loath the institution of public school. These viewpoints stunned me because I honestly thought that the natural and proper path for a young student was to finish high school and at least attempt college when they felt they were ready for the task. I was so blinded by these beliefs that I had convinced myself that my own difficulties with this path were an aberration and a poor reflection of me as a person, rather than on the overshadowing views of society, which strongly and silently command the choices of its youth.

Over time, the team that I worked with in the behavioral collaborative became a strong unit. With the support of the principal, my paraprofessional counterpart and I were able to integrate the services of the special education teacher and school psychologist into the general education classroom, providing a successful inclusion model for kids with emotional disturbances. During this time, I was able to use my colleagues as resources. I could ask questions about behavior management, teaching strategies, anything that could improve myself and make me better at my job.

While working with struggling students at this stage in my career, I remember thinking that each student could overcome their difficulties through sheer force of will and hard work. I struggled through middle school and I have memories of my parents keeping me up late to fix spelling and grammar on my homework. I thought that the struggles that I went through built perseverance and

character and I thought that I could build those personality traits in my students by emphasizing the importance of hard work and a healthy effort.

From the beginning, I wanted to be good enough to meet my student's needs. I thought that my good intentions and positive attitude would somehow make up for my inexperience. I watched "difficult" students work hard and make gains with teachers who truly and openly cared for them. I took this observation in and believed that through forging strong relationships with my students I could somehow help them learn and facilitate the closing of the student's educational gap, as if somehow there was a relational disconnect that needed to be bridged for the student to be successful.

The collaborative that I worked in was so self sufficient, that I did not readily see the need for formal leadership beyond daily management and the facilitation of discussions. Those that I worked with were so good that I used to think that all teachers had an inherent moral compass pointing toward a common goal. I used to think that when teachers said they were in education for the students they unequivocally meant it, with no addendums or qualifiers. I believed that all teachers were noble and sacrificed almost anything for their students.

After three years as a paraprofessional, the collaborative I worked in broke up and the tight knit group of professionals went their separate ways. The special education teacher transferred to regular ed, the psychologist and the principal left the district and I was left in the unknown. With these changes came opportunities. A job opening appeared for a special education teacher in my school. My colleagues pushed me to apply for the job under an alternate certification. With thoughts that I was not qualified to teach, I followed the process and landed an interview.

During the interview I faced a group of people who knew exactly what I knew and what I didn't. These people had watched me interact with students, handle academic and behavioral difficulties; however, beyond some basic competencies I believed my inadequacies were apparent. The only thing that I could do is make a promise, that if I got the job I would do everything I could to learn as much as possible so I could benefit my students. Within two years of getting the job I was on my way to keeping that promise, I had received a master's degree in special education and two advanced endorsements, one for learning disabilities and another for emotional Behavioral disturbances. During those two years, my learning and application of educational theory and pedagogy were simultaneous. My previous experience as a paraprofessional gave me a framework to draw from, build, and reflect on. I began to see why the things I did as a para worked and didn't work.

My ideas on what true learning was developed with time, experience, and education my. Primarily and most importantly, my experience has given me a wider view of people and the world. I try not to automatically place people in a category and assume they are on the same path as me. I do my best to fight the notion that there is a "right" path to be taken. I look to understand and try and find value in alternate view. I still believe hard work is a major cornerstone in any form of learning, but I have witnessed hard working struggling students give up on education because there was no reward. I see now how praising effort more than

conventional educational progress creates students that understand the power of effort and therefore become lifelong learners.

I still whole-heartedly believe that relationships are the strongest catalyst for learning. I have come to understand that deep meaningful relationships with students are by in large highly undervalued in the standardized education of today. I have also come to understand that relationships are just the beginning of learning and not enough by themselves. Good teaching must be a combination of among other things; relationships, pedagogy, content knowledge and good teamwork. Where I struggled so hard to fulfill my promise to my peers and become “good enough” for my students, I know realize that is impossible task. Experience and my growing family have taught me though teachers may need to make sacrifices for their students, there is a limit to what can be expected. I have accepted that as teachers, our students deserve more then we could humanly give them and our best hope is that we do our best in a given time and constantly improve ourselves for our next student.

Most recently to evolve are my views on educational leadership. Where I used to see little room for formal, organized leadership in a school, I now see the conflicting beliefs within a school that oppose organized and systematic reform. I see the importance and difficulty of building consensus to move forward with a common goal in mind as well as the importance of the school’s cultural environment. As individual teachers, we are limited on what we can accomplish, but I believe that through strong visionary leadership we can bring together all the stakeholders of public education and improve outcomes for every student.

The path that I have taken, though different from many of my colleagues is not unique and in my opinion it would serve education well as a whole if more professionals took this route. All of my experience points out the value of substituting sitting through course work focused on learning abstract ideas for gaining experience by learning from professionals in the field, dealing with real issues with tangible outcomes.

Where prospective teachers now work toward earning a grade for a degree, they could be working to fulfill a promise to not only the professionals they work side by side with, but also the young students for which they work. Perhaps the educational system and American culture as a whole does not give enough value to paths outside of the traditional norms and is not ready to mold their teachers by methods based heavily on internships rather than coursework. However, it is possible that teachers who take such a path themselves would better recognize the individual paths of their students and be better suited to help them start their lives outside of formal education.

### **About the Author**

**Michael Herrington** is a special education teacher who started his career at the Cutler School in the Monadnock Regional School District in South Western New Hampshire. Originally starting with an alternative four certification, he has earned a master’s degree in special education at New England College in Henniker, NH and advanced endorsements in learning disabilities and emotional behavioral disturbances at Granite State College. Michael is currently working as a special educator at the Monadnock Regional Middle High School and is a second year doctoral student at New England College in the K-12 Leadership program

## *I used to think... Now I think...*

Alexandre Magalhaes, School Superintendent

### **I used to think...**

My teaching experience began as a math teacher at a comprehensive high school and continued in this role for more than ten years. I was a product of a liberal arts high school education and believed that a comprehensive high school education provided the most prominent road to success. I truly thought that the curriculum provided an academic course sequence and a wide array of choices that prepared students to succeed in college and beyond. I used to think that a college degree was the most important factor in getting a good paying job. Although I still believe that it is a good educational choice for students, as two of my children attended a traditional high school education, I know believe there are other high school choices of equal value that prepare students for college and career readiness which ultimately gives students better employment opportunities.

I used to think that vocational education, also known as Career and Technical Education, CTE, was an alternative high school for students that are uninspired, low performing, and low achieving students with a lower tier of a high school education. I believed the objective of a career and technical education was to prepare students for the workforce after high school graduation and felt that CTE was a good alternative education for students who may otherwise drop out of school. I assumed that CTE high schools prepared students with skills for low paying jobs and assumed college was a stretch for students. This was my perception as a high school student and as a teacher at a traditional high school.

### **I now think...**

I began teaching at a vocational high school when a former colleague recruited me to join him as a part of a growing math department. With some hesitation and in trepidation, I accepted the offer to teach math at a vocational high school. I quickly discovered that the existing programs and culture did not challenge students academically and that most seemed satisfied with their mediocre performance. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessments Standards (MCAS), school standardized math test results at the school revealed very low outcomes in comparison to the state average. I found out later that one of the reasons they wanted me to join their school was due to my experience with MCAS and that I was instrumental in aligning the math curriculum with MCAS frameworks at my previous position.

Prior to my second year at the school, I was asked to pilot a stand-alone geometry course for tenth graders. This occurred due to the MCAS results data showing our students did poorly on the geometry portion of the test. The following year students who took the course had the highest scores in the school. I remember when I asked to teach this course I was told that vocational students were not capable of mastering geometry like other students in the state and that they should not expect vocational students to be part of state assessments. I used to think that

way too, but after teaching one year at the school I began to have a different perception of these students. I did not see them as “vockies” but as students who were capable of performing academically as any student in the state. Although I approached my academic coordinator to consider raising the level of instruction and provided him with a course of sequence that would enhance the math curriculum, he did not think the students could handle a rigorous course of study. In my fifth year at the school I was hired as the academic coordinator and the former principal became the superintendent. During my interview process I explained my vision of increasing the MCAS scores and preparing all students for post secondary education through an academic and technical education approach. It was not easy to persuade veteran staff that they needed to raise the bar from what they have been teaching for years. Although change was difficult it worked to my advantage I know those staff members would support my vision. I would often talk to these people prior to meetings in an attempt to get them to speak. This enabled others to hear my vision from other staff members. I used MCAS data to realign the curriculum and in my third year our school received the Massachusetts Compass Award for having the highest gains from one year to the next, and always achieving Adequate Yearly Progress, AYP.

The next step of my vision was to bring in Advance Placement programs to our school. I found AP programs would add the rigor to our course of study and be advantageous to our students who are pursuing a post secondary education. While I had many staff doubting that our students could handle the rigorous course of study because of the time commitment required and the type of scheduling at vocational schools; one week in academics and one week in technical programs. I designed to have students in a cohort where they would all have the same schedule and the teachers would meet once a week to collaborate their lesson plans to support a common theme. This way they would all know what each teacher was reviewing for the week and therefore did not over burden students with assignments. The feedback we received from the students was that they did not like the cohort model because they were in the same class with the same students for four years. In our third year I redesigned the schedule so that honor students would only have the same math and English class together but other classes were dispersed among students in their grade. Today we offer five AP courses: Calculus, English Language & Composition, English Literature & Composition, Biology, and U.S. History, an academic course of sequence unheard of for vocational schools. Students are not only taking these courses at higher rates but also increasing their scores in these subject areas. The irony is that most teachers were scared to teach AP courses in the past, now they are positioning themselves to teach AP classes by asking to attend week long summer AP training and this has allowed us to redesign our academic curriculum which will provide students a college ready academic course of sequence.

I now think that traditional and vocational education can provide students with an educational experience that will prepare them to be successful in a post-secondary education. Parents often ask me what is the difference between the two educational experiences. My answer is that they both prepare students for college, however the traditional school provides a liberal arts education and the vocational

education or CTE prepares students for a trade or career. In my opinion, I no longer think that vocational education is an alternative option for low performing students, rather it is an education that provides a curriculum that engages students in an educational process where all students can benefit.

Five years ago, a new position called Program Administrator was created for me. In this position I over see all technical and academic programs. I believe it was created because in my third year as academic coordinator, the technical coordinator went out on medical leave. I was asked at this time to supervise both the academic and technical programs. Although this was a daunting task, it was a learning experience that I was excited to take. I was able to observe technical staff instruction, review their curriculum, and develop a better understanding of how they kept a group of students focused on a skill or task all day. I was so impressed by how engaged the students were, that I offered the academic staff to chose a day to observe the shop of their choice. The reasons for offering this were to allow academic teachers to see the other side of students and their work ethic and for the academic staff to observe project based instruction in a technical class. I was very fortunate to get the support from the principal to allow me to hire substitutes as replacements when needed. I also found that technical teachers were not very effective when they had to teach in front of the class during their related period therefore I offered the same option for the technical teachers to observe the academic teachers during class. To this day, all staff members are encouraged to observe other staff members and share best practices to enhance instruction and student engagement. These observations continued through the development of the integration committee, where academic and technical staff looks at ways of integrating curriculum. This committee was instrumental in designing the senior project where all seniors must have a sign off by their English teacher, for the written portion of their project, and their technical instructor for the constructional part. The students are then required to present their project to an outside audience.

As Program Administrator, I am also involved with assessing the academic and technical programs. My first year in this position there were two programs, Drafting and Machine Tool Technology that were not attracting students to the field. After observation and evaluation of the two programs, which were similar in many ways, I decided to combine them into one program, rather than consider another program to meet the demands of the market they represented. Initially this was a very unpopular move because the instructors did not want to work together and they could not understand how it would work. In fact, they had the advisory board in my office encouraging me not move forward with my plan. To make a long story short, it is now one of our most popular programs. Students draft a product; send it to a 3D printer for testing as a prototype, then move on to manufacturing the product. To this date we have all our seniors on Co-Op, paid work experience, and our juniors will be going out after second semester. Recently we have been approached by Johnson & Johnson to train their engineers on the manufacturing process because they see the advantage of the design to machining process used by our students.

In my current position I have opened three new programs, an application process that takes one full year to complete, that are often oversubscribed. Dental

Assisting is very popular with students that want to go into dental or health related careers. Biotechnology is on its second year and these are students that want to enter into the science field. Marketing is on its first year and has shown a lot of interest with students that are looking for opportunities in the business field. I now think that these programs offer students opportunities for career readiness by preparing them with the academic and technical education and work-related skills necessary to be successful in postsecondary education (including associate and baccalaureate programs), training, and employment.

As mentioned earlier, my two oldest sons went to traditional high schools; my daughter attends a vocational high school and is in the dental assistant program. I now believe that a vocational high school education provides a prominent road to success as a truly “college and career” readiness education. When Littky (2011) describes how he turned around Thayer Junior/Senior High School he credited to “paying attention to students and making education more real and part of the community, the drop out rate declined dramatically and college rates increased” (p. 106). He seemed to describe many objectives that vocational education offers; using advisory boards to help develop curriculum and recommending equipment that meets industry standards. Students engage in paid internships during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Students also build close relationships with their technical instructors over the four years. These relationships help build confidence and self-esteem through independent and collaborative work with peers and instructors.

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### **About the Author**

**Alexandre Magalhaes** is the superintendent of a Career and Technical Education school district and currently a second year doctoral student in the New England College doctorate program in K-12 Leadership. His 26+ years of education experience includes being a bilingual student, math teacher, varsity coach, school committee member, curriculum and academic coordinator, and many other extra-curricular activities. He taught in a comprehensive high school as a math teacher for approximately 12 years and has been in a career and technical education institution for over 12 years as a math teacher and administrator.

## *I Used to Think.....And Now I Think*

Betty C. Mulrey

Director of the Holy Cross Early Childhood Center, Manchester, NH

I started out in life with a B.A in mathematics, planning to get a job in the field and moving on from there. However, the “baby boom” was in full force and jobs were scarce. Instead, I went with a friend to Europe, spending many months there on “a dollar a day,” riding the trains and seeing architectural and artistic masterpieces on a daily basis. From this I learned about the incredible influence and significance of the arts on the human race.

I returned home eventually, and decided to serve my country in the military. This was a curious decision on my part, as I protested against Vietnam in college and was against most anything military at that time. I remember watching in fascination as college students burned their draft cards. But, here I was a few years later heading to Officer Training School in San Antonio. It was through studies there that I first realized the academic side of what it means to be a leader. From this I learned about the vision, planning, and logistics involved in military operations both past and present.

The Air Force had a plethora of material for us to study on how to lead organizations. I was sent to communications-electronics school at Keesler AFB in Mississippi, where I learned more than I ever imagined about radars, electronics, and communications systems. There came a day when I had to brief a general on a battlestaff as to the communication-electronics status of the air fleet where I was stationed in North Syracuse. From this I learned that given enough motivation, anyone really can learn anything. Here was I, random female math major, actually learning about and understanding radars and border defense systems. Heavens!

While I was in the Air Force, I had the opportunity to take college courses free of charge. I used this opportunity to obtain a master’s degree in business administration. What is interesting about this pathway is that I had no interest in business whatsoever before taking on this field of study. One might say I did it just to say I could do it. From this I learned that even though we have preconceived notions about things, experiencing them can change those notions significantly. I found myself just fascinated with the business courses, including those on management and human resources. To this day, I find myself reading up on companies and how they are managed.

I served my time in the military and then took some time to raise my family in New Hampshire. Things got interesting when my husband was sent by his employment to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War, taking myself and our three young children with him. We lived there for four years. On our compound was a preschool which my children attended. Being an overprotective mother, I volunteered at the school to keep watch over my children, and ended up teaching at the center and eventually directing it. From this, I learned about diversity and multicultural awareness, as there must have been over seventeen nationalities present at that little school. I also learned about the importance of politics in education, as the school was run by the U.S. Air Force on a

compound owned by the Saudis, and managed by a private firm. Serving three masters was quite the balancing act.

On our return flight to the U.S., we had an overlay of 3 hours in an airport in France due to aircraft delays. We were in an isolated section of the airport, and there was absolutely nothing to do. Some children I didn't know came over to me and asked me to play with them. I was taken aback, but decided to take up their offer. There were no toys, so I made up puppet shows and games to play with the children using coffee cups, napkins, spoons, and anything I could find lying around. That was a "light bulb moment" for me. The three hours easily passed, the children and I were completely engaged, and I realized that this had to be my career. Early childhood it had to be!

I returned home and enrolled in early childhood courses, eventually getting a master's in education, specializing in early childhood. I taught kindergarten and preschool for a number of years, hosting student teachers in my classrooms along the way. From this, I learned much about teaching, and about how to facilitate learning for student teachers. I also realized that the process of learning is forever ongoing, as the elements of research and culture unite in a continuously evolving process.

One of my classroom families invited me to apply for a principal position at a small elementary school in rural Mason, NH. This I did, and I worked as a principal/teacher there for a number of years. When I arrived, the school district had just become their own School Administrative Unit (SAU). I therefore started with an empty office! I had to create many documents from scratch, such as building security plans, Title grant applications, a teacher evaluation system, and so forth. From this, I learned in depth about the requirements and paperwork necessary in administrative positions in public schools.

Over the years, I have learned about the importance of politics in organizations, and in getting stakeholders on board with initiatives and with proposals for change and growth. Prior to this, I believed that mission goals and theory were sufficient to get things done. Little did I know that politics could supersede those things in a flash!

My next career move was as an instructor at Merrimack College and at Granite State College. I learned how to design and facilitate early childhood courses at the collegiate level, as well as how to develop other courses such as those dealing with leadership, diversity and social justice. I was Lead Faculty for Early Childhood and Early Childhood/SPED at Granite State for a number of years, which gave me the opportunity to design early childhood courses from a systems perspective, aligning these courses with the college mission, with state standards, and with needs of teachers entering the world of education as a career. It's quite the experience to consider what new teachers now require in terms of skills and disposition for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

I find that every time I teach a college course, I myself grow as an educator. Time and again the students in my courses open my eyes to things I had not known or seen before. I now find myself proactively asking my students for input, materials, and ideas. Many comply with this request, and I am able to share with the rest of the class what these students have contributed. Much of it I add to the content for the next time the course is taught.

I spent a year working at a private startup early childhood center, which taught me about state child care licensing standards. I observed carefully as the director at this center worked on building expansion, filling her classrooms with students. I also took

note of relationships the director had with town officials and with the landlord from whom she rented her center.

I am currently in a new position as director of an early childhood center in Manchester, NH. This is a remarkable center based on the Reggio Emilia philosophy from Italy. Children in this center work on long-term projects, as both planned and emergent curriculum take into account child interest and passion. From this, I have learned about the importance of school climate, philosophy, and ways to incorporate “academic learning” into an artistic, hands-on, exciting environment filled with natural items, natural light, and documentation of learning. I have learned that assessment and documentation can take forms which are pleasant and valuable.

I have often wondered how individualized learning can happen in group educational settings. I know how much my own children gained from both group interaction at school and individually or with siblings at home. I believe that we as educators should reduce or eliminate standardization and tests in our schools, replacing them with meaningful and personalized education. Let’s give our schools the right to develop their own programs and to be held accountable for them.

My current place of employment is an early childhood center with children ages three through five. Personalized, rigorous academic learning here has a magical ingredient: an academic tutor! We have a former director of the center who, in her “retirement,” comes to us from 7 a.m. to noon. She takes each child for fifteen minutes, and gives each child personalized activities and challenges. Math, reading, and writing are covered in many forms, including hands-on materials and use of manipulatives. Our academic tutor knows exactly where each child stands in these key academic areas, and she is easily able to take each child to the next level. She selects from the wealth of activities on her shelves what would be appropriate for each child given their individual learning profiles. She sees every child daily – so each child can grow, regardless of where they stand academically. This individual academic emphasis allows the other teachers in the center to do more integrated curriculum and to have more play and exploring time, allowing for optimal social/emotional growth and child choice. Littky (2011) refers to the idea that real learning comes from real experiences, and forming one’s own ideas of what learning is and how to apply it. He also mentions that curiosity, moral courage, application of knowledge, and perseverance are as important as reading, writing, and speaking.

Human resources are essential to a quality education system. We share with many countries the issue of low teacher salaries and the challenge of finding quality people to staff our schools. China has made strong strides to develop a system of organizing teaching in order to address the significant disparity in teacher competence in that country (Tucker, 2011, pp. 28-29). Ways have been found to attract stronger students to teaching colleges, and to make teaching a profession which can include stability in income and position.

The field of early childhood education in the United States suffers not only from low wages for teachers, but also from the need for stronger professionalism and increased knowledge on the part of teachers. Early childhood educators need an excellent disposition for educating the very young, but this is not enough. Many of these educators do not have the professional education background necessary to support solid knowledge of child development and developmentally-appropriate practice. For example, in New

Hampshire one only needs nine early childhood credits to be an associate teacher having one's own classroom. No credits are necessary to be a child care assistant. Yet, the effect of what early childhood educators do in the classroom and the ways in which they interact with children can affect those children for a lifetime.

I used to think that "the experts" were quite knowledgeable, and that the system could be trusted to them. I now believe that we need to rethink our perspectives and the very roots of our beliefs. For example, it may well be worthwhile to think in terms of holistic education, as described by Ron Miller (Elmore, 2011, pp. 121-125). Our world, its spirit, its sustainability, and its delicate condition need to be key to any reform of the education system. Learning about other school systems, such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio Emilia among others, will broaden perspectives and allow us to see how others have handled these issues. I think (as Miller suggests) that we should look carefully at untapped human potential in schools, talking about what organic education means, and investigating how we can trust the inherent developmental wisdom of life.

I used to think of our world as a "global melting pot," with our many cultures and identities blended together. Now I think in terms of our cultures and identities as not melted together, but rather interwoven into a magnificent quilt of experience, knowledge, and tradition, keeping the essence of individual identity. Sonia Nieto says that we don't have much effect in general on changing our students' worlds, and we shouldn't expect our teachers to leave their "culture and identity at the door" (Elmore, 2011, pp. 129-133). Parents, families, cultures and diverse ideas can play major roles in learning. They should all be at the discussion table and all be part of the solution to addressing tolerance and social justice issues in our world, our community, and in our classrooms. I believe as Nieto says (p. 133) that we should take strong steps now "standing up with, not for, those who are most powerless in society and working with them to create change." Determining how to accomplish this should involve all stakeholders in the system, constantly reaching out to new stakeholders as they emerge. This new paradigm of thought may lead us to the idea that there are no special needs and no disabilities, but only our own individual needs and abilities whatever they may be.

A chat with Gail Poitras at a Granite State College faculty meeting led me to apply to New England College for their doctoral program. From this program, I have learned some things which have validated what I believed was true over the years, and some things which I didn't know previously. Brain research has been an eye-opener for me, as I now have new and valuable perspectives on the human brain and how we learn. It has been fascinating to find out about the many paths learning can take on the way into long-term memory, and the implications for this process in the educational system.

I am in the process of learning about visionary leadership, and I look forward to continually researching educational systems around the globe. I have found that competency-based education far outweighs the traditional grading system. Learning can expand beyond school walls into the outside community and world. There are many ways to assess and document competency.

I have also learned a great deal from my fellow cohort members and my course instructors as they have shared research and ideas about education and its progression into new and uncharted realms. Collaboration, mutual feedback and discussion have opened many doors for me, broadening my mind, knowledge, and understanding in remarkable ways. I hope to continue and add to this collaboration in the future.

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### About the Author

**Betty Mulrey** is a second-year doctoral student at New England College in the K-12 Leadership program in Henniker, NH. Betty C. Mulrey was raised in VA, residing the last 30 years in NH. She has three wonderful children. She holds an MBA and an M. Ed, specializing in early childhood education. She served in the USAF as a communications-electronics officer. She has taught in public and private settings, including a lab school where she mentored student teachers. As a principal, she organized and designed an elementary school structure for a new school district. She is faculty at Merrimack College and Granite State College. She enjoys presenting workshops on children's literature, the role of therapeutic puppetry, puppetry in literature, story-telling, collaborative relationships, building meaning through the arts, and teaching tolerance. As a task force member, she designed indicators for culturally competent early childhood programs. She is on the development committee for a New Hampshire online charter school. She sings in a local chorus and the NH Chamber Choir.

## *Reflecting on Learning*

Melissa J. Muzzy, M. Ed., C.A.G.S.

When reflecting on my experiences with education, I have a long history of over 41 years, upon which I can draw. Beginning school at the age of four, I found a place in which I was eager to explore and socialize. Since my father was in the military, my family moved often and I found myself transferred from one school to another, often multiple times in one school year. As one might conclude, as a result of this there were gaps in my skills and knowledge that persisted into high school and college. Despite these gaps, I was able to persevere because at home my parents fostered a belief that school was important. If I studied hard and worked harder, I could achieve anything. Through this reflection, I see where, as Dennis Littky (2011) describes it, I learned the game of school well and was successful at it. This was not a shared success with all my siblings.

Neither of my parents graduated from high school and while they did go on to pursue General Education Diplomas, my siblings and I were brought up with the expectation that we were all going to graduate high school and go on to college. I never doubted it. As time passed, each of us had different experiences with public education, which ultimately impacted the directions we pursued beyond high school. Our different personalities, learning styles, and levels of determination set us apart not only in our goals but also in how we saw ourselves achieving them. Not all of us fulfilled my parents' expectations to graduate high school or attend college. Initially, I struggled to see these differences as examples of success; however, with time and experience comes understanding. As we all came from a similar background, the differences in our experiences can be largely attributed to our perceptions about school. While our paths may have been different, my sisters, brother, and I can all claim degrees of success based on how we individually define it. These experiences and observations have shaped and reshaped my beliefs about education and what I think I know about teaching and learning.

My perceptions about education include personal experience as a student, a parent, and an educator. Perception is "the way you think about or understand someone or something" (Perceptions, 1991, p. 1001). Individuals use their perceptions or observations of the world to form their perspectives and beliefs. I use to think that the only path to success was the traditional academic model. This perspective was shaped by my perceptions of personal success I had with this path. This perception is challenged daily as I work with students for whom this model is not supporting their success. I now understand that schools need to rethink how we measure success and the paths available to achieve it.

My perspective on teaching and learning is shaped by my perceptions. Perspective is defined as "one's mental view of facts, ideas, etc. and their interrelationships" (Perspective, 1991, p. 1008). It is the point of view formed by these observations and experiences. In reflecting on my own learning and beliefs about learning, I have come to understand and respect that differing perspectives are not right or wrong but rather an

opportunity to gain insight into another's thinking. With this understanding comes the realization that to be an effective educator and an inspiring leader, I need to let go of being in control and begin working collaboratively not only with colleagues, but students, parents, and community as well. This means being open to critique while maintaining confidence in self, and perhaps most challenging, admitting when I need help.

I used to think that all children can learn and that it is my job as the teacher to find the key to unlocking each child's potential. After all, I have the knowledge and training to help all students achieve; it is what I prepared for during my undergraduate studies and what motivates me in continuing my education. I find myself needing and wanting to know more the longer I teach. If I do all the right things, and use all the right tools, I can reach any and every learner. Patience, compassion, and understanding along with my skills and knowledge will enable me to reach all of my students. Now I know that this is true. However, I also now know I cannot do it alone. While students may work with "I can" statements, teachers need to work with "We can" statements. Every student can learn. At the same time, understanding how to reach all students is an unrealistic expectation for any single educator. In Finland, the education of children includes addressing the needs of the whole learner and each student has a "care group" that meets regularly to work collaboratively reviewing and addressing a learner's needs (Cheng, 2011). This team approach to addressing challenges allows educators to utilize one another's expertise to meet a shared goal and personalizing the learning experience for every student.

As teachers we have more opportunities than ever before to seek support from colleagues, administrators, families, and experts in a variety of fields, yet we continue to use terms that isolate teaching and learning such as my class, and my students. We need to begin using language that recognizes the collective responsibility of educating our future: our students, our classes, our teachers, our schools, and our communities. Now I believe that every child can learn and my role is to build trust, acknowledge success, address areas of opportunity, teach to my strengths, and connect resources, both people and materials, to individual learner needs. It still feels a bit overwhelming, but can be much more empowering for both the learner and the educator. Teaching and learning is a life-long journey.

I used to think that leadership was someone else's job, that I could make more of a difference as a classroom teacher to improve student learning than if I worked with other adults. Leadership is the superintendent's job, the principal's job, not the classroom teacher. While I see myself as a positive role model, I now also see someone who needs to follow through beyond showing and telling to supporting the actual doing involved in helping others become better teachers. If leadership is truly about a state of mind and less about position this transition is happening. The act of reflecting provides me with the opportunity to step outside of my daily activities to look at the impact I am having on others. Before dismissing the role of leadership to others, I needed to define it for myself. Leadership is "the act or instance of leading; guidance; direction" (Leadership, 1991, p. 770). I do this everyday along side my fellow educators. Together we have the skills and knowledge to help students set and meet learning goals. Natsiopoulou and Giouroukakis (2010) discuss the benefits for schools that encourage teacher leadership based on review of a school in Greece. By including teachers in the leadership of a school they become more connected with the goals and values and their collective

responsibility to and for teaching and learning (Natsiopoulou & Giouroukakis, 2010). Empowering and supporting teachers to take on leadership responsibilities sends the message that their knowledge and expertise are valued. They are professionals.

I used to think that visionary leaders worked outside of the reality of implementation and the politics involved with making changes. My perception was that just as scientists work to test hypotheses in very controlled conditions limiting the impact of potentially interrelated factors, visionary leaders work through ideas in small unique settings, which often are not easily duplicated. Educational reform requires innovation that works within the system. Traditional education models have changed very little over the past 50 years and alternative routes are exclusionary based on socio-economic status, either you are eligible because you make too little or you have options because you can afford them. I now understand that while there are many obstacles with leading reform that challenges traditional practices and structures, visionary leaders see these as areas of opportunity; imagining the possibilities and having the skills needed to move individuals forward. As a developing visionary leader the ideas surrounding anytime, anywhere learning resonates strongly with me. Bramante and Colby (2012) state, "... forward-thinking [leaders] embrace using students' strengths to conjure up exciting options that can be made available for their students as a positive change in how they go about the business of getting students to learn" (p.81). While pathways supporting this type of learning are expanding, the traditional school model continues as the dominant direction for many learners not all of who are successful. My expanding perceptions cause my perspectives to shift, clarify, and strengthen. Now, how can we, as educational leaders, facilitate expanding the possibilities? Drawing from Dr. Mary E. McNeil (2014), we need to begin exploring, "In what ways might we..."

### **Perceptions**

Perceptions belong to the individual.  
 Sometimes they may seem shared,  
 However, the very nature of individuality  
 Reminds us that no one can see events exactly the same way.  
 Perceptions are shaped by our experiences.  
 They are changed, refined, or strengthen  
 Throughout our lives by our sum of experiences.  
 They are how we make sense of the world and our place in it.

Perceptions tap our emotions.  
 Joy and happiness can blossom with friends  
 While sadness and heartache can explode without them.  
 Our self-perceptions are impacted by how we are seen by others.  
 Perceptions can result in judgments.  
 Whether authentic or truthful, they can lead to loneliness,  
 Misunderstanding and hurtfulness compounded.  
 Others may not see the hopelessness.

But do not despair...  
 Perceptions can bring strength and hope.

Reminding ourselves to remember  
 we do not all share the same experiences  
 will guide understanding and reason.  
 Search for the perceptions of others.  
 They are a tools that can be used to develop insight,  
 foster creativity, and build compassion.  
 Seek to perceive perception.

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### About the Author

**Melissa J. Muzzy** a reading and writing specialist at John Stark Regional High School in New Hampshire, earned a Masters in Education for reading and writing from the University of Rhode Island, a Certificate of Advance Graduate Studies in Education for special education from New England College, and is currently working toward a Doctorate in Education in K-12 Leadership through New England College. Her continuous pursuit in the area of education is fueled by the belief that everyone has the ability to learn and it is through the teaching of others that true knowledge acquisition is demonstrated. Acting as a role model for her children, students, and colleagues, she reflects on her practice and understandings, seeks critique, and embraces new ideas. In addition to working with students in the classroom setting, she has conducted workshops on using data, differentiation, and school policies. It is this work with adults that has lead her to pursue a degree in leadership and to explore ways of improving support for both students and educators. She is committed to encouraging and empowering others to achieve success and reach their goals.

## *I used to think...Now I think...*

Gail Poitras

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I used to think teachers drove the instructional path of their classroom, and if one worked diligently to improve pedagogy, one-highly tuned, adaptable approach would work for all students. I first began my teaching career in the 1970's. My very first lesson plan was developed around the concept of allowing students to construct their own knowledge about area of a rectangle using the area model of multiplication. I was a strong believer in constructivist education and thought if I could help students discover major mathematical concepts, they would truly learn that concept. I felt I had a knack for developing constructivist mathematics lessons; however, the same instruction and lessons were geared to all students, sometimes working in pairs, groups, or as a whole-class, but still a one-size-fits-all model.

When I moved to teaching middle school students in the 1980's, I continued to pursue staff development and training, allowing me to fine tune my constructivist philosophy. I was a member of the first cohorts in New Hampshire to work extensively with Mahesh Sharma, a renowned mathematics educator, and began training in the concrete-pictorial-abstract-application model of instruction. It was my first formal, in-depth work with manipulative materials, and I took to it like a duck to water. It was a yearlong training, and I immediately began applying what I had learned in my math classes. However, differentiation still was not apparent in those classes.

Now I know even the best one size does not fit all. Knowing others realize this as well was heartening. Thomas Hehir, a strong supporter of inclusionary education, speaks about how he now must consider that for some students, inclusionary education may not be the best fit (Hehir, 2011). Like Hehir's continued belief of inclusionary education as his ideal, my belief in constructivist education is still my ideal; however, I also realize it is not the best approach in every situation and for every student.

I also now believe student voice and choice is critical in the educational process. Student choice gives students the freedom to make choices about their education in tandem with their parents, teachers, and other involved stakeholders. If a student and teacher do not feel a constructivist approach is the best way for the student to learn, I need to listen to and to have a dialog with the student, exploring adaptations and other alternatives. Research has shown student choice improves student learning, especially when students are given cognitive choice (Birdsell, Ream, Seyller, & Zobott, 2009; Nistal, Dooren, & Verschaffel, 2012). Student choice also correlates strongly to the basic principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) by offering ways of customizing information, guiding goal setting, enhancing the capacity for monitoring progress, and optimizing individual choice and autonomy (National Center for Universal Design for Learning [UDL], 2011).

I used to think the progress we were making in the 1980s to educate teachers in the use of manipulative materials, cooperative learning, teams and co-teaching, interdisciplinary units, and constructivist-based teaching was the beginning of a major movement by teachers to improve instruction. I truly thought those techniques would be an integral part of the majority of math classrooms by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Now I realize how difficult systemic change is both difficult to initiate and sustain.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, I was lucky to work in a middle school not encumbered by standardized, high-stakes testing; teachers could be creative in both their curriculum and the daily schedule. Our small middle school had one class each for fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, and each of the four content area teachers had his or her area of expertise and certification. I taught fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade mathematics. More importantly, though, our team ran our schedule and developed our curriculum based on state and national standards. We co-taught and team-taught interdisciplinary units and met almost on a daily basis to discuss student work, future plans, and students of concern long before PLC became a buzzword. Our team wrote and published a teaching manual for a fifth through eighth interdisciplinary unit on Planetary Research Operations Based Exploration (*Project P.R.O.B.E.*) containing lesson plans covering all four disciplines. Students, more than two decades later, still are in contact, remarking on how that unit was their most memorable middle school learning experience. Our P.R.O.B.E. manual was part of the middle school methods course at Plymouth State University in the early 1990's. At that point in time, yearly testing was done, but it was more a summative point of interest for parents and, unless something extraordinary popped up, underwent only general review by teachers with an eye towards curriculum and skill improvement. Administrators understood that with entire grade sizes of 12 to 25 students, results varied tremendously from year to year. I still consider the period of time from 1985 to 1997 as the time in my teaching career where I flourished and grew the most as an educator.

In the late 1990's, I moved to the high school, and especially in the early years, was given many opportunities to grow and improve my pedagogy and classroom instruction. I regularly attended and sometimes spoke at conferences, flew to Australia with a group of educators to observe math instruction in Melbourne, collaborated as a department chairperson to institute professional development and other opportunities for teachers within the department, and took part in a major data study to develop an action plan for the high school to improve mathematics instruction. Then I watched as opportunities for growth and professional development within our school district become scarcer and more difficult to obtain permission for, and many of the initiatives I was part of began to wither and become forgotten as newer initiatives were given precedence.

Now I know, unfortunately, true change takes time and commitment from all stakeholders if it is to be sustained. One example from personal experience is the action plan developed to improve mathematics instruction at the high school. Looking back now with the added advantage of Bolman and Deal's theory of restructuring (2013), I do think we adequately addressed the human resource frame, but I do not think we paid enough ongoing attention to the political frame, making sure major stakeholders were kept apprised of our progress. Initially, when we presented our report and plan to school administrators and the school board, we had their support. However, as time went on and despite our warnings noticeable change would take time, our initiative got lost in the

shuffle of new initiatives and other ideas. We lost our opportunity because of our failure to maintain constant communication of our project's status and value to our stakeholders. Ultimately, not continuing to convince others of the progress and importance of our project was our plan's downfall. Knowing what I have learned as a result of my doctoral studies and careful reflection and research, I would have planned a timeline for the project with many more opportunities to connect with our various stakeholders.

I used to think a staff development opportunity worthwhile if I came away with one important point/technique/lesson I could implement in the classroom. I remember early in my career, my mentor told me if I changed 10% of what happened in my classroom each year, I would maintain reasonable, sustainable change. If I went to a workshop (and I attended plenty through the years), and I found a lesson plan or technique I felt was a good fit with my students and the curriculum, I tried it. As the result of attending several workshops sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), I implemented more cooperative learning activities and technology-based activities with my students. After visiting Australia in 1998, I began using the "Australian tasks" with my students. These were a series of activities having the ability to extend and differentiate into extremely rich learning experiences for students.

Within a year of beginning my doctoral program at NEC, I went to a formative assessment conference where Dylan Wiliam was the guest speaker, followed by a series of workshops on researched, effective best practices by Dr. Robert Greenleaf. These were some of the first workshops I experienced featuring meta-analyses and research data as a basis for implementing various formative assessment techniques and other best practices. While I am sure research was mentioned in previous staff development opportunities I have attended, it was certainly not a focus or highlight as it was with these presenters.

Now I question any new approach that has not been the focus of careful research and study prior to its implementation into the classroom or school community. As a result of careful research into best practices, I was glad to find some researched best practices were ones I have focused on throughout my career, while also finding some I hope to implement and expand upon in my own brick-and-mortar and online classrooms. The best practices I now think are most critical for improving student learning include creating and sustaining student-teacher relationships; the effective, timely use of formative assessment in the support of student learning; cooperative learning; co-teaching opportunities; student expectations and self-grading; and allowing students voice and choice in their learning (Greenleaf, 2014; Hattie, 2012; Wiliam, 2011).

Finally, I used to think brick-and-mortar schools provided students with the best chance for an equitable education. I was a student of a brick-and-mortar school, and I flourished in that environment. I spent my career trying to improve student learning in the traditional classroom setting. In 1997, I had the opportunity to teach my first online class for the University of Phoenix. As I have always enjoyed a new challenge, this seemed to me a cutting edge opportunity. There certainly was a steep learning curve! The entire course was structured in an Outlook online mail format. The curriculum was prescribed, but even at that time, there was an emphasis on training and online communication. From that point on, part of my teaching was done outside the traditional brick-and-mortar setting. I now teach online for other colleges and for the Virtual

Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS). The online learning platforms are much more sophisticated than they were in those early years.

I now think learning can occur anywhere, anytime and anyplace. Like Marshall S. Smith (2011), “I believe that when we look back on the coming decade, we will see it as a time when technology became our most important teaching and learning tool” (p. 172). Currently, over two million K-12 students engage in online learning and these numbers are growing exponentially (Barbour, Grzebyk, & Eye, 2014). Online student populations are diverse, many more students are choosing online courses as a way to earn credit recovery or to graduate from high school, and virtual student populations are extending into elementary grades (Hawkins, Graham, Sudweeks, & Barbour, 2013). As Smith (2011) states, “If we act even a little rationally over the next few years, we will be able to integrate the power and usefulness of modern technology with a coherent and challenging curriculum for all” (p. 173).

I now believe blended learning models will individualize student learning while allowing for individual district flexibility. Implementing a blended learning model involves changes in the school culture; the structure of the school; how human resources will be used, trained, and supported; and how the program will be guided. For a program to succeed, it is very important the majority of stakeholders support the program: students, teachers, staff, administration, parents, and community members. For this to occur, all parties must have voice and choice throughout the project to ensure their support. This program must be supported by others as needed throughout the process and guided by a taskforce/committee/group represented by all interested and impacted groups. By doing this, a school culture of engagement and student voice and choice will be supported.

Beyond the benefits to student learning, I believe possibly the biggest impact of blended learning programs will be on our teachers and staff. Not only will faculty need to learn new teaching techniques, but they will also need to learn to become proficient with the technology and learning platforms they will be using. It is critically important their staff development is robust and continuing. As I mentioned earlier, I have too often seen programs start the implementation process, but there is never the necessary reflection and adjustment needed for a program to succeed. Hopefully staff development will be robust and continuing, as the good news is many school districts have begun implementing blended learning within their brick and mortar schools, and many different models are emerging. To me, this is very exciting!

Since beginning to teach at VLACS last summer, I have had conversations with many students where they shared with me their reasons for taking an online class. Some are enrolled or moving to becoming enrolled in VLACS full time, while others are just taking one or two courses. The various reasons range from course availability issues in their home school to students with medical issues precluding them from attending school, schedule flexibility, setting a comfortable learning pace for themselves, and unresolved bullying issues in school. These conversations have helped me realize the importance and necessity for giving students flexibility in their learning choices.

Since my first class of fifth grade students in a school in Massachusetts in 1974 to my online and face-to-face secondary and post-secondary students today, I have been blessed with a career where not only was I given the opportunity to sustain life-long learning, but hopefully I was able to guide and support the learning of my students along

the way. There is still no better feeling than helping a student attain that “ah-ha” moment! More than anything else, the one thing I know now is we can never stop learning, researching, and striving to find better ways to help all students learn.

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## About the Author

**Gail** Poitras is a second year doctoral student in the Doctorate of Education K-12 Leadership Program, Henniker, New Hampshire. Gail has been fortunate to be able to learn about and to teach mathematics to students of all ages for over four decades. Convincing students they can learn math, assisting them in that journey, and sharing with other teachers effective methods of teaching and assessing mathematics have been strong goals throughout her career. As Lead Faculty of Mathematics for the School of Education at Granite State College, Gail not only teaches mathematics and mathematics education methods courses but also is helping to develop strong pre-service programs for future middle and secondary

school mathematics teachers. She believes effective change begins with research, is developed with the active involvement of all stakeholders, and is sustained with continued reflection and perseverance.

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