A TIME OUT:

AUTHENTIC LEADER DEVELOPMENT

THROUGH LIFE-STORIES ANALYSIS

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Kathleen A. Dawson
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation work to my biological mother. Selflessly, she made the ultimate sacrifice no mother should ever have to make. In order to ensure a life for her children that she realized she could not provide, my mother gave two of her five children up for adoption. For years, I questioned how she could make such a decision. My mind has been able to rationalize the choice but my heart continues to struggle, though it is getting easier with every day that passes. Nowadays the struggle arises no longer from anger but from my longing to have enjoyed more time with her. I know that my mother struggled for years to live with her decision. I can only hope that she was able to forgive herself as I have forgiven her.

My Dearest Mother,

May you rest in peace in reunion with the love of your life, our father, who was taken away from all of us too soon. I thank you for your painful sacrifice and ask for your forgiveness for any hatred or anger I may have held against you. I know I did not make your life any easier after our father’s death. And regardless of the struggle of my American life, it is still a wonderful life – a life I have because of your love.

I did not realize the degree to which I was living my life in order to make you proud until I was working on this dissertation. I wanted to make sure that your sacrifice was not wasted. I work hard to be a good person so that you could be proud of me. I have made sure to receive the education for which you sent me to America. I hope that by completing this doctoral degree and striving to be the best I can be, I made it all worth it.
I never got to tell you, “I love you.” So please know, I have always loved you and always will. You are my one and only mother.

Until we meet again...

Your Daughter, Eun Kyoung

This dissertation is also dedicated to my sister, Bo Kyoung. Had it not been for me, she would not have left Korea and the love of our family, for which I am truly sorry. But I am glad that she came to America with me.

My Dear Sister,

Thank you for sharing this journey to America with me. I could not imagine having to come to this strange land all by myself. I do feel responsible for taking you away from the only life you knew. I hope you’ll forgive me.

You are the one person who has been there for me my whole life. Through thick and thin, good times and bad, you have always been there. As children I was charged with taking care of you. As adults you have taken care of me, and for this I will forever be grateful. I am glad you are my sister and there is not anyone in the world with whom I’d rather have shared this experience with than you. I love you.

Forever Sisters,

Your Sister
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Completing a doctoral program has been a long process. The fact that I am writing this final page of my dissertation is due to the support of very special people. First and foremost, I want to thank my dissertation chairman, Dr. James H. Lytle. In my last effort to finish the program, Dr. Lytle intervened and was willing to take me on and see me through this journey. I am deeply grateful for his tough love and for not giving up on me. With firm but gentle guidance he pushed me to turn this dissertation into an opportunity for me to grow as a leader, but more importantly, to grow as a person. I am appreciative of his willingness to share with me his life stories, and for showing me how leadership can and should be done. If it were not for Dr. Lytle’s commitment, kindness, time, and expertise, I do not believe that I would now be completing my dissertation.

I would also like to express my gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Michael Nakkula and Dr. Priscilla McNeil Dawson. I have truly appreciated their time and expertise. Their supportive feedback was essential to the completion of my dissertation.

In addition to acknowledging the members of my committee, I would like to thank the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and, more specifically, the Mid-Career Doctoral Program. The professors at the Mid-Career program shared their wealth of knowledge and expertise with humbleness and created a network of education experts across the country. I feel fortunate to be joining this community.
Special thanks go to Dr. Michael Johanek, Martha Williams, and Jessica Lundeen. Over the years, they remained optimistic and believed that I would finish. They took care of little details that might have overwhelmed me. While many other institutions and their faculty may have given up on me, Penn and the Mid-Career program did not. Thank you.

I would also like to extend my gratitude, appreciation, and love to my family and friends. From the beginning, they were always encouraging, supportive, and had faith in me. Intermittently they reminded me that I could do it, pushing me to finish. When I was struggling, they never judged me. More importantly, I am grateful for having my family and friends in my life. Throughout my life they have given value and meaning to my life and continue to do so. My life is so much richer because of my family and friends.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all those who go above and beyond to serve children, as have Miss Joyce Lund (my first grade teacher), Ms. Jody Langseth (my mentor), and Mr. James Turchi and Ms. Daphne Steele (my high school guidance counselors), all of who have made a difference in the lives of children. Thank you for valuing our lives and choosing to serve children. The world is a better place because of people like you.
ABSTRACT

A TIME OUT: AUTHENTIC LEADER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LIFE-STORIES ANALYSIS

Kathleen A. Dawson
James H. Lytle

For over seventeen years, I have dedicated my life as both a teacher and an administrator to serving our children, especially our children of color and those of lower socio-economic status. I have lived and felt the successes of our children and teachers as well as the pain of public education. I have striven to be an authentic leader, keeping our children at the forefront of why we do what we must in order to provide ALL of them with equitable access to a quality education and opportunities. This has come at a heavy cost to me both professionally and personally.

During a “time out” in my career, this dissertation granted me an opportunity to reflect and analyze who I have been, who I am, and who I might become. More specifically, it allowed me to take a look at certain life stories of my past, and thus to better understand my professional experiences so that I may work towards becoming a more effective and authentic leader.

This study used an autobiographical framework with a qualitative design to analyze my life-stories and thus address the following questions:
• What meanings am I taking away from my life stories?
• How do my life-stories help my development as an authentic leader?
• How has the notion of authentic leadership helped me understand what has happened to me professionally thus far?
• What influence will this process have on who I might become?
• Can this strategy help others develop into authentic leaders?

The study notes the importance of personal growth for professional growth and argues that being true to oneself does not necessarily lead to authentic leader development. Authentic leader development requires individual, systematic, and routine reflection on selected life-stories and an external catalyst to promote the discovery of deeper meaning in both the leader and his/her followers.
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I. Chapter One - Who Am I?

Introduction

It all began with an unexpected “time out” in my professional life, which caused me to question what I was doing and why things were happening the way they were. I had worked hard to do what I believed was the right thing to do. Yet time after time, outcomes were not in my favor. I thus embarked on a journey without knowing where it would lead, and I totally did not expect where it did lead. Trying to learn how to become a more effective leader, more specifically a more effective authentic leader, I found myself retelling stories from my past. But the importance lay not in telling my life stories but in searching for meaning in these stories. “Knowingly or unknowingly, we attempt to master personal and professional situations according to how we interpret our experiences” (Cashman, 2008).

So often we look outside of ourselves to develop our leadership skills. Alternatively, Boas Shamir and Galit Eilam suggest that we look into ourselves if we wish to grow into authentic leaders. Thus, in order to use this study as an opportunity to develop into an authentic leader, I followed Shamir and Eilam’s suggested life-stories approach. This meant opening myself up in ways that I have never publically done before. As you go on reading, you will therefore learn as I learned, a great deal about who I was, where I have been, and the meanings I am taking away from my life stories. What is not specifically stated is how these newly found meanings will help me move forward. This is because the process is still ongoing.
As previously stated, this journey led me to an unexpected place, to unchartered territory. Although this study has ended, my journey has only begun. I encourage those who come across my study to share my experience and process in trying to answer the following questions:

- What are the meanings I am taking away from my life stories?
- How do my life stories help my authentic leader development?
- How is the notion of authentic leadership helping me understand what has happened to me professionally until now?
- What influence will this process have on who I might become?
- Can this strategy help others develop into authentic leaders?

More importantly, I encourage the reader to have the fortitude to embark on his or her own journey to develop the authentic leader within him or herself through a life-stories approach.
Personal Lifeline

At the height of my career, I found myself resigning from what I thought was my dream job, wondering what and where things had gone wrong and why. For months I had questioned how to stay true to myself and still do the work that was required of me, even if it went against what I believed. When had I developed such a strong stance that I was willing to give up my means of support in order to stay true to my beliefs? In order to deal with these questions and to understand how I had become the leader I am today, I needed to go back to the beginning, to the moment when I had begun being myself.

I was born in Seoul, South Korea and lived happily with my father, mother, an older brother, two older sisters, and one younger brother. I would like to say that we were a typical family. Father went to work and was the provider while mother stayed home to take care of the children. Grandfather lived with us, enriching our lives with the values of our elders. He was my best friend. My memories are of love, happiness, and a strong family bond. Life could not have been any better. Then, one night when I was five years old, a loud banging abruptly woke us from our sleep and our mother’s piercing cry told us something terrible had happened to our father. To this day her wailing haunts my mind, and the news of our father’s death cuts deep into my heart. Since that night, our lives have never been the same. I lived my life with the understanding – although I do not know where it came from or whether or not it is true – that my father was killed in a truck accident. He had been a produce driver; one night he fell asleep at the wheel and collided head-on with another truck. The steering wheel had punctured his upper body. That visual never left my mind.
My mother’s soul mate was gone. I remember hearing her saying out loud—when she thought I could not hear— that she wished she could have gone with him, that she did not want to live without him. Our father was gone. What would happen if our mother left too? At five, I worried about having no parents. I have vague memories of our father’s funeral. I remember my mother in white linen and the sound of crying. I knew but did not know what was going on. I just knew we were all sad. This was my first experience of death and loss.

So, overnight we went from a middle-class family that did not have to worry about where we were going to live, what we were going to eat, or how we were going to survive, to worrying about everything. We moved from our house into a one-room flat with no heat. I remember waking up to a frozen puddle of my pee. I remember going to the market and stealing an apple and running away as fast as I could. I was that hungry. Our mother did the best she could to raise her five children by herself. She was gone most of the time at work and her two oldest children had quit school to help support the family. We three younger children were left to fend for ourselves. Of the three of us, it was not the other two causing problems; it was I.

I tried going to school, where I remember an authoritarian teacher, who was strict and cold in her demeanor. I recall beating boys in races in the sand, being teased by my classmates, and being a first grader. I also remember being asked where I would like to be whipped, on my fingertips or behind my calves. Why, because I had not brought a pencil and paper to school? I distinctly remember thinking that if the teacher was going to hit me she would look into my eyes while whipping me. So I chose my fingertips. I held them out straight and strong and with each whip of the switch I refused to cry or
flinch. That was my last day of school. I could never afford pencil and paper, and it was not right to be punished for something over which I had no control. Even at the age of six I knew that much.

I remember skipping school to hang out with my legally blind grandfather, acting as his eyes as he taught me things not taught in schools or books. I remember hanging out with him and his elderly friends in a smokehouse, watching them smoke their long pipes and listening to their stories. I remember challenging the young people who teased my grandfather as we walked the streets. I remember crumbling the pages of my schoolbooks until they became very soft before using them for toilet paper. The other pages I folded into toys, which I used to play with all the other kids playing hooey. I was a proud champ just so that my little brother could go lose all my winnings to my opponents. I remember traveling at night to find my mother and bring her home to her children. I remember defying her orders to buy her cigarettes by bringing home fish so that we could have food to eat. Of course these memories come from a seven-year-old’s perspective. These were impressionable years. They were the best years of my life, my Korean life. I might have been hungry, poor, and struggling, but I had my family and their love and I was happy.

Unfortunately it did not last. After two years of struggling in order to take care of her five children, our mother learned that some mothers were sending away their children to a country full of opportunities. I cannot imagine the agony she must have endured before deciding to give up her child, but my mother decided to give me away. Looking back, it made sense that her choice fell on me. I was the youngest female and Koreans preferred to keep their male children. I was also the most mischievous of the five, the
most hardheaded, and stubborn. That must have made her decision a bit easier, I suppose. With time I could rationalize her choice in my head but my heart can still not understand how a mother could simply give her child away. It was not as though she had just given birth to me. We had shared a life for seven years. We had developed a bond that was deeper than that of mere birth. But the decision was made.

As if this was not demoralizing enough, the process of adoption stripped me of any humanity that remained. My mother turned to Korean Social Services to hand me over to a family in the United States. In preparation, I was cleaned up, vaccinated, made to look as cute as a wild, roaming child possibly could be, and photographed. The little mug shot was then placed in a catalog along with photos of all the other little children to be sold. A family of two mothers and a twelve-year-old adopted Korean were enamored of my picture and decided to buy – oops – adopt me. Once my mother learned this, she asked the family whether they would be willing to take my sister too so that I would not grow up alone. The American family agreed as long as the adoption would not take long to process. To this day I feel bad and responsible for my sister having to bear the collateral damage of being my sister.

While at Social Services, I remember seeing my first American. He was tall as a giant, had hair as yellow as corn silk, and a protruding nose like a toucan’s beak. It was a great adventure, but at the end of the day, it was time to go home. Since my mother was not there to take me home, I remember climbing a tree, jumping a wall, and running home, just to go back. I did not know the reason for the special events then, but I do now. Everyone but my sister and I knew we were being sent away. In order that they would all have a chance to see us one more time and say good-bye, we took a trip to visit
our relatives in the countryside. Back home, I remember that one day my grandfather held me differently than he had done at other times, as though he never wanted to let me go. He held me tightly and cried. I did not know at the time, but I later learned that that was when he had learned of my fate. Had I known then, I would have never let him let me go. I knew that our last meal together was special because we actually had white rice, which we could not afford. Whenever we ate, we only had barley. It was then that our mother told us that we were going to a place where we could have whatever we wanted as long as we were good. I remember visualizing going down a slide, and as long as I was good landing in a place where I would have everything my heart desired. But if I were bad I would come down the slide as a skeleton onto a heap of bones.

Coming to America was what it was. I left the only world I had known and entered an unknown realm that would take away my Korean name, give me an American one, and lead me to my current life – a world in which I did not fit because I was Korean-born, spoke no English, had slanted eyes and a flat face. These at least were the reasons why other children made fun of and laughed at me. But it was not only the other children but one of our adopted mothers that stripped me of self-esteem. She used to tease me about looking like an Indian (Native American) in a derogatory way with other negative connotations, which made both my sister and me know that we had to assimilate as quickly as possible if we were to survive. I cannot speak for my sister as she had a very different experience from my own, but the one stereotype that was true and that I played to my advantage for the sake of survival, was my intellect. Throughout elementary and middle school, being smart and helpful to my classmates helped me be accepted as much
I was going to be, considering my differences. In addition, turning the taunting remarks of other children into the butt of jokes helped dissipate the pain.

Over time, I learned that my American life was not typical of that of children my age. I do not know whether it was because I had been adopted by two women, or by women who were nearly old enough to be my grandmothers, or for both reasons, but my childhood was even more unusual now than before. Of course, my sister and I were expected to listen and obey, which we did. I was expected to get straight As in school and to grow up to be a doctor or lawyer. I was not allowed to have friends outside of school. I could not watch television, listen to the radio, use the telephone, or do much of anything else. I was expected to scrub floors, keep the house clean, help garden, and to keep the yard clean despite many dogs. I was expected to go to the local nursing home on weekends to take care of the elderly. (The painful part of this experience was that I would get close to the elderly, especially grandfather figures, just to lose them to death.) I was expected to work multiple paper routes to save money for college. I was expected to dig aluminum cans out of garbage barrels to save money for college. Any money that I earned from babysitting or other jobs was to be given to my adopted mother, who was supposedly putting it in a bank account for college. I never did get that college money back.

I did not think anything of these expectations. To me, this was American life. I knew nothing else about America. Yet somehow I did know something was not right. I knew that being called names, being ridiculed and demeaned by my own adopted mother was wrong. I knew that being hit for the tiniest things was wrong. I remember being obliged to protect my sister because my Korean family had asked me to do so in a letter
after we left. So, whenever she was about to be struck, I would step in and take the blows for her. No matter how many straight A report cards I brought home, or how obedient I was, I was never good enough. I remember spending weekends in bed with only bread and water for punishment – for what, I don’t know. I must have done something wrong. There was only so much I could take; at the age of fifteen, I had had enough. Turning myself in to social services, I told them that I would not survive if I had to continue living with my adopted parents. How ironic! In Korea I had run away from social services, but here I was, turning myself in to them.

The next phase of my life lasted only about four years, but these seemed like forever. Social services removed me from my American home, placing me in an emergency shelter until they found a foster home for me. Whenever I was mistreated in a foster home, I would run away, be caught, then taken right back to the shelter. This happened several times. I liked the shelter and preferred to stay there. I knew what it was, and the people working there did not put up fronts; they were there to collect a paycheck and do their jobs. Foster parents pretended that they were taking me in because they cared and wanted to help, while telling me that they liked the extra money and having someone to do the chores. I remember telling one of my foster parents that slavery was over and I was not there to serve them, before running away yet again. Of course I was sent to a “shrink” to determine what was wrong with me. I recollect hearing one say that I was one of the smartest kids she had ever met and that there was nothing wrong with me. After that, I would say that I was going to my appointment, then take off and run away. Obviously I was smart enough to know that I was not the one needing therapy – at least not the type of therapy my adopted mothers thought I needed.
It was my adopted parents that needed therapy. Why did they adopt children simply to mistreat and use them as indentured servants?

This went on for about two years, until finally I got my day in court. I asked the judge if I could be emancipated. By then I was seventeen and in grade ten, and as irregular as my attendance was, I was passing. (I was one year behind in school because instead of being placed in the appropriate grade when starting school in America, I was moved back to second grade because I could not speak English.) Somehow I always managed to have a job. I knew I needed one, as I had no other means of supporting myself. After the judge heard about my history with the shelter and foster homes he approved my emancipation and said I was now on my own.

Thinking back, I had no plan. It was not as though I had arranged for a place to live, or had a means of transportation, or anything else. All I had was an industrial strength black garbage bag that I had been carrying around with the only possessions that had been given to me when I left my adopted parents’ home. But I was not about to complain. I was finally free. I began by crashing at friends’ homes whenever their parents were away. Sometimes I slept in the car of my friend’s parents and got up before everyone else so I could make a clean getaway before getting caught. I recollect one brutal winter night that was so cold that my boyfriend helped me break into his grandmother’s trailer home for the night. I found a box of candles, lit all of them, and stood them up in a cake pan to use as my source of heat.

Surviving was the game, keeping a job a must, and school whenever it fit in. Teachers had no clue what was going on in my life nor did they care. My chemistry teacher made bets with the rest of my class to see if I would show up, and if so, at what
time during his class. On the occasions that I was able to make it, I entered into a class full of mockery. I knew this only because one of my classmates told me why everyone always laughed when I came in. It was similar to the humiliation of my having been whipped in Korea for not having pencil and paper. I therefore went to class solely when I knew there was a test. The teacher shared with one of my classmates his thoughts on how strange I was. I showed up only for tests but then scored higher than did students who were there every day.

My physics teacher was no better. I used to challenge his teaching because I felt that he could not teach. On the days I was in class, my classmates would ask me for help, and the teacher would get mad and call me names. We would both go at it and have yelling matches. Normally I never thought of yelling at an adult. But at the time, I did not care. I was angry as heck, and honestly, what did I have to lose? I told my teacher that I could teach myself physics better than he could. So, he gave me a book and told me what to turn in, but said that I was not to step foot into his class. I agreed with the plan. I went from failing his class to an A for the term during which I stayed away. Once I had proven my point, I quit.

I did have some allies. My two guidance counselors were huge supporters. They helped me arrange my schedule so that I could leave school early to go to my job. They also got me free lunch tickets, which I sold for cash. Eating occurred only when necessary. I had gone hungry before in Korea, so this was nothing new. I did miss a lot of school and the assistant principal threatened that I would be kicked out unless I attended more regularly. When I was sick, I chose going to work over school. He suggested that I go to the free clinic but my pride would not allow for that. I remember
another time when pride got in the way of my receiving help. I was told I could get assistance but that I needed to apply for it through welfare. I went to the office, but once I saw the others who were there to sign up for welfare, I knew that was not I and ran out.

After a year or so living from place to place and wherever I could find a spot on which to lay my head, I was finally able to rent my own flat. This happened between my junior and senior year, and I was so happy! It did not matter that the place was a small, converted one-room garage with indoor-outdoor carpeting, a tiny kitchenette in the corner, a bathroom in which you could practically take care of all your business by standing in one spot, and a furnace in the middle of the room that leaked gas. It was my own place. I had to make sure to work every day; usually I had more than one job, often three jobs at a time: one during the week, a two on weekends. I did not want to lose my living space because I could not pay rent. Rent was three hundred and fifty dollars per month, plus utilities. Minimum wage was three dollars and seventy-five cents per hour.

Through all these years, I never lost sight of the reason why my mother had given me away. It was the only way she knew how to provide me with access to a life better than the one that she could have offered. It was an opportunity for me to get a good education. I think it would have crushed my mother’s already broken heart if she had known the American life I had had. I know that it was not what she had hoped for me. As angry as I was at her for giving me away, I did not want to waste her sacrifice or any of our pain. If nothing else, I was going to make sure that I got my education. Thus no matter how tough things got, I made sure that I did what I had to in order to graduate from high school.
After graduation I could not afford to go to college, even if I had been ready. I was not ready. I took a year off simply to focus on working and pulling myself together. My high school years had been tumultuous to say the least. After a year, I began a local private college as a potential biology major and chemistry minor. I was going to become that doctor that I had been so brainwashed to become. I still felt compelled to do what my cruel adopted mother had wanted me to do. The one advantage was that I actually loved the subject matter. The academic rigor was welcome and the thought of studying the human body was fascinating. But after two years of student loans, I could not afford to keep going and had to stop for another year. One thing that did help me afford going to school while working part-time was my decision to use some of my student loan money to purchase a multi-family home. This allowed my tenant to pay the mortgage while I no longer had to worry about rent. This was the earliest evidence of my entrepreneurial tendencies, all thanks to the teachings of my high school sweetheart.

My life started to feel calmer and more under control, but I still did not know where I was going to school and what I was going to study. As much as I loved the idea of becoming a doctor, more specifically a neurosurgeon, it did not feel right. Then a good adult friend and mentor suggested that I check out becoming a teacher; I seemed to be a natural at it. So, after researching the two public state universities in the area, I gave up a scholarship to another student whose only chance of going to college was through this scholarship meant for students of color who wished to go into teaching. I knew I would go regardless of the scholarship or not. The other student was fresh out of high school and struggling, and I knew that struggle. I also preferred the university in the next town because it had a stronger teaching program. Mind you, this meant more student
loans for me, but I knew my decision was the right one. At least I was sure of it at that moment. Later I learned that the struggling student had ended up dropping out of college.

Here I will stop sharing my college experience and leave that for later. Instead I will continue with my personal life. During high school I had one boyfriend whom I eventually married. We were already supporting each other through thick and thin, so it made sense to make the vow to do so for the rest of our lives. I was only twenty-one, and he was the only boyfriend I had ever had. Plus his help through my trying teenage years had formed a bond between us. Our lives were beginning to make sense, and I no longer needed to struggle. I was fulfilling my mother’s dream; I was receiving my education and was living a good life. My strained relationship with my adopted mothers was on the mend and my sister, who had abandoned me due to her disapproval of my behavior, grew out of it, and we were once again close. But there was still something nagging me. In elementary school, I had set my mind on going to Harvard because of its reputation as being one of the best schools in the world (or so I was told by my adopted mothers). I imagined how proud my Korean family would be if I had been sent to America only to go to Harvard. I always thought that I would go right out of high school, but that obviously did not happen. But I could go for my master’s and doctorate. In addition, I had never fit the community in which I had grown up, and was always wondering whether I would feel more at home in a city. So we packed up our things and moved to a neighboring town of Cambridge, so I could be closer to Harvard.

Things seemed to be going well until I experienced a betrayal different from any I had ever experienced before. My husband and I had made a vow for life, so who did he
think he was to break it? For life means for life, so what was he doing? Needless to say, my marriage ended. It was a different kind of loss. I thought I was going to die. How did others live through such pain and devastation? What right did anyone have to impose such pain? The pain my mother had caused me through her abandonment had been one of love and sacrifice. What was his excuse? But as with other pains, I survived this one. Once I got over the pain, the experience was actually liberating. I found a new life, my life, one in which I was reliant solely upon myself. I was happy and free.

This continued for a number of years. Eventually I found myself in another serious relationship. Things seemed fine and moving right along. Then one day I received a phone call from my doctor with the results of my regular check up. It was not as bad as it could have been, but however slight, one never knows how one will react to the “C” word. The problem was minor, but the cancerous cells were on the cervix and I had not had any children. This rushed the conversation and we found ourselves trying to have a baby only to learn that it was not going to happen. Regardless of scientific efforts, there was no explanation. It simply was not meant to be. It was as though I were being punished for loving children so much. There was no getting away from it; I was struck once again by devastation. At least my cancerous cells could be treated, and over time the threat disappeared.

As with all things, we get past them with scars and all and move on until the next tragedy hits. This time it was the death of my partner’s father. It was significant because I had not been with my father when he passed. Now I had the opportunity to be with his father. I held his father’s hand and gave him permission – as if he needed it – to go, and told him that everything would be okay. He passed moments after. This was like the
way I held my mother’s hand after my sister and I were reunited with our Korean family twenty-three years later.

In the beginning, our Korean family did have contact with us. Initially we wrote letters at least a couple of times per year, but eventually it became once a year plus one Christmas card from our family each year. But with all that I was going through, I had stopped writing out of shame. How could I explain to my mother that I was getting into trouble? That is not why she had sent me to America. I could not bear writing lies, so letters stopped. It was not until the Fourth of July twenty-three years later when I was rummaging through letters from Korea that I came upon a phone number. With my heart pounding, I dialed, not knowing what to expect. My little brother’s wife answered the phone; she knew of me. In her broken English, I learned that my mother was dying and we needed to go to Korea right away. I was overjoyed to have made contact, but then immediately on edge. I had just found my mother to learn that I was losing her once again. Within a week we were on our way back home.

My sister and I sat on the plane holding hands, just as we had done, I am sure, when we first left Korea. Both times we were scared, not knowing what to expect, anxious and in anticipation. It had been twenty-three years. Would we recognize them? Would they recognize us? We no longer knew each other. What if the reunion was bad? Could we endure another abandonment? It was the longest plane ride ever.

After we went through customs, there they were – our brother and sister and all their children waiting with flowers, smiles, and tears. For a split second, I felt that love and warmth that I had only felt as a child when our family had been one. And as quickly as it had come, the feeling fleted away. Time had passed; we were all grown up and we
did not know each other. We were strangers with only a past that tied us. After many
hugs and stares, we hurried to our little brother’s home where our mother lay waiting for
her two lost daughters. The only way I knew that she was my mother was by her eyes.
As I was being swept away by the moving sidewalk twenty-three years earlier, the last
thing I had seen were my mother’s eyes. I had hung my head down to hide the tears but
looked up to meet her eyes; that had been my last vision of my mother until now.

My mother was dying of cancer and was holding on as long as she could in the
hope that she would see her two daughters once more. In the Korean way, my mother’s
bed was a light padded blanket on the floor. She seemed a skeleton, just skin and bones
with a feeding tube in her stomach and a hole in her throat from the cancer. She could
not speak so with tears in her eyes she wrote in Korean with her frail hands, “Please
forgive me.” Regardless of the ills we held toward her, they all disappeared as I,
kneeling down beside her, forgave her. What else was there to do?

For two weeks we spent time reuniting with our family. We could not speak
Korean so one of our second cousins, who studied English, traveled around with us to
translate. We visited our old neighborhood, from which our mother had refused to move
in the hopes that we would come back one day looking for her. As I had grown up never
fitting in, it was difficult to come back home and still not fit in. It was different and
unusual to be surrounded once again by features that made us blend right in. But it was
annoying to be pitied because we were the poor girls who had been given away. It did
not help that we did not speak Korean, but that was not our fault. In America we were
not Americans, and back in Korea, we were not accepted as Koreans. What were we
then? I felt like an outcast. And yet my oldest brother was so proud to let us know that
we were descendants of the emperor of the Yi Dynasty. He too apologized for letting us be given away. He said he himself had only been a teenager back then and did not know better. If he had, he said, he would not have allowed us to be given away. After meeting our large extended family, I could not understand why they had not been able or maybe did not want to help our mother keep her children. The question “why?” came flooding back, but it does no good to hold on to it. It merely keeps our wounds fresh. I soaked in every sight, smell, and sound of my homeland, where I had always belonged. Two weeks later it was time to go back to reality.

It was different returning to America. The last time I was traveling to a foreign world of the unknown; this time I knew where I was going. Two weeks after our return I received word that our mother had passed away. This time I returned solely to bury my mother and to say good-bye one last time. Many Koreans have become Catholics but still practice the rituals of ancient beliefs. For three days and nights the family stayed awake, watching over my mother’s body. It was the third day when I returned to find her wrapped in white linen and lying in a simple wooden box. Her face was surrounded with white flowers. As soon as I stood beside her, her eyelids opened. My brother said it was because she wanted to see me one more time. I called out to her in the way that I wish I could have done when being sent away twenty-three years earlier. Once again, I had to say good-bye, and it was just as painful as the last time. My spirit left my body and floated alongside me for the rest of that day.

We took her body to a crematorium near the burial ground some distance away. There, lined up next to each other and separated by glass, were five furnaces billowing with fire, each with a different family saying good-bye. I sat with my family as the
workers in their white robes placed my mother’s body onto a metal slab and slid her into the furnace. And for two and a half hours I just sat, silently wondering what it would have been like if I was with her my whole life. I sat and listened to the roaring of the fire. It sounded like the hooves of horses, drawing a chariot to take my mother home to join the love of her life. When it was over, the white-robed men came, opened the furnace, and pulled out the metal slab with my mother’s remains. One of her charred ribs and foot were still standing, so the man crushed them with a heavy metal weight and reverently swept her ashes into a wooden box. From there we went to the mountainside where the ground next to my father was already dug up and waiting. It was raining hard that day and we stood under a blue awning as we placed my mother’s ashes into the ground. Then more workers in their high muddy boots filled the hole and quietly went back and forth to get the dirt and stomped on the dirt and eventually formed a round mound above ground. You could tell that they had done this hundreds of times or more. It was their job, yet they moved in a rhythm with respect for the dead and mourners. We burned a nice outfit so that our mother would have something to wear to her next life. We made our offerings and shared a meal before we left. This is what must have happened when my father died, but I was too young to remember. Before leaving, I went to speak with my grandfather at his burial site right above that of my parents. Both my parents were gone but it was always my grandfather whom I missed the most.

This brought closure to my old Korean life. My sister and I started a new Korean life with our new found family. We visit every two to three years and talk regularly as often as we can, considering that I still cannot speak Korean. But this did not take away from my having to deal with the American adopted family. The two moms were getting
old and needed care. For some reason, despite all the trouble we had had during my teenage years, I knew that I out of the five children would be the one who would eventually have to take care of them. (My adopted mothers ended up adopting one, and becoming legal guardians for another two American children ten and eleven years after adopting us.) After a month of court battling, I was appointed guardian and conservator of both my adopted moms. Not knowing the monumental task that this would be, I took on the responsibility. I was not going to let the county take custody. This meant placing one mom in a nursing home and the other into a memory-care facility. The difficulty is that they are in the middle of the country, while I am on the coast. Going on six years now, I travel to check on them approximately once a month and sometimes more frequently according to their health. Third year into the guardianship, the dominant and cruel mother died (I stood alone as her body was slid into the furnace), while the other went through health issues that had me traveling back and forth every weekend for about six months. This has taken a toll. Then adding to that guardianship is the conservatorship, which is a full-time job in itself. I have to account for every penny earned and spent, and when it does not balance, there is another nightmare. I did not get to take care of my biological mother when she was in need, so maybe this has been the opportunity to make up for it. And yet all my life, when I yearned for the comfort of my mother’s arms or words of comfort, they were not there. Those needs went unfulfilled. I just learned to accept the fact that those were needs that will not be satisfied, and that it is what it is. My life’s journey, the people I have met, loved and lost, all the experiences, good and bad, are what have helped mold who I am. But I get to choose who I want to be.
I chose to dedicate my professional life to serving our children, especially our underrepresented children. All that I lived and experienced made me more compassionate towards our children that too had faced trials and tribulations. Below is my professional time-line since graduating from college with a Bachelor of Science in elementary education and minors in mathematics and science.
## Professional Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Professional</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996-1997</td>
<td>First teaching job; first grade teacher at music magnet school with the ISD #709 in the Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>Taught first grade in affluent suburb west of the east coast city</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>Started first job with Urban Public; taught 9th grade at Bunker Hill HS; served as Assistant Unit Leader, Math and Literacy Specialist for school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>Second year of teaching at Bunker Hill HS; looped up with students; served as Assistant Unit Leader, Math and Literacy Specialist for school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>Took leave of absence for 1 year to attend graduate school full-time; enrolled in Harvard GSE’s principal certification and school leadership program; served as President of HGSE’s Student Government Association; interned as headmaster at Bunker Hill HS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>Returned to Bunker Hill HS as teacher leader and unit leader; participated in district’s principal program; interned at Roosevelt HS as headmaster for 7 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002-7/2005</td>
<td>Transitioned to assistant headmaster position at Roosevelt HS; assisted in restructuring school schedule and created new credit recovery program; oversaw freshman class and math department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/2005-6/2009</td>
<td>Transitioned to help start Global Business Academy as Senior Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment/Assistant Headmaster; took on every aspect of starting and running a school-developed new curriculum and new programs (dual enrollment, internships etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/2007-8/2015</td>
<td>Started Mid-Career Doctoral Program at University of Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/2009-12/2009</td>
<td>Transitioned to Castle Hill HS as headmaster; dealt with fallout from decisions regarding staffing; removed from position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2010-8/2011</td>
<td>Transitioned to City Technical Vocational HS as Principal/Director of Tech Academy for remainder of year; designed new pre-engineering program; expanded the business vocational cluster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/2011-8/2012</td>
<td>Transitioned to Principal/Director of Freshman Academy at City Technical Vocational HS; school transitioning to innovation status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/2012-3/2014</td>
<td>Transitioned to Stem Academy—exam school as assistant headmaster; oversaw social studies department; put on paid leave during investigation due to allegations made by teacher/disgruntled evaluate; cleared of all allegations; returned next SY to oversee guidance department; same disgruntled teacher made allegations again but through Department of Children and Families; cleared of all allegations by DCF and district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/2014-1/2015</td>
<td>Transitioned to headmaster position with Seaside HS; worked with school and community to improve turnaround high school; struggled with lack of autonomy and authority to lead in a way that I saw the school community needed; conflicted with the superintendent’s style; became evident that my role and position was in jeopardy after I notified superintendent of her verbal abuse and bullying; negotiated out of contract</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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II. Chapter Two - Purpose of Study

Research Questions

Living in an intermingled world of people and work, how does what I have experienced and the person I choose to be, impact my professional life? Why is it that I have lost my confidence in what I am supposed to do? I find myself questioning whether I should stay in my profession or move on to something else. Why should I stay in a profession that does not appreciate my life commitment to serving our children? Everything that I have done, I have done in the best interest of our children first, and teachers, second. To the best of my knowledge, I have done everything that I was supposed to do. I have always striven to be an authentic leader. So why is it that others, who do not care as I do or have committed their lives like I have to our children, get to make mistakes and continue being rewarded while I am challenged and pushed aside? During this down time in my life and career I used this dissertation, to reflect deeply and analyze my life and career, while seeking answers to the following questions:

• What are the meanings I am taking away from my life-stories?
• How do my life-stories help my authentic leader development?
• How is this notion of authentic leadership helping me understand what has happened to me professionally, to this date?
• What influence will this process have on who I might become?
• Can this strategy help others develop into authentic leaders?

The concept I explored to assist in my reflection and analysis is authentic leader development. We are living in an era in which school leaders and officials are being
convicted and sent to prison for cheating, making us question what is happening to our leadership. More importantly, what is going on with our values? Pressures to produce more, to improve performance and to be more and better are higher than ever. But regardless of the pressures, how can we develop leaders who have greater moral capacity? Capacity (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003) meaning that “leaders have developed the ability to see their role as including an ethical responsibility to their stakeholders, having the level of moral perspective to recognize and evaluate ethical issues, and having learned from past experiences how they might best deal with moral dilemmas at work” (p. 247). The need for a more values-based leadership has led to the development of a new construct of leadership: authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011).

At the core of authentic leadership is the authentic leader. Authentic leaders possess that moral capacity and

“are positive, optimistic, and are willing and able to stay the course to make and execute difficult decisions. They are, quite simply, people we trust with our future. Authentic leaders are not necessarily transformational, visionary, or charismatic leaders. They don’t stand out every day. But these are the leaders who, when called upon by the hand of fate, will be the ones who take a stand that changes the course of history for others, be they organizations, departments or just other individuals” (May et al., 2003).

So where are these authentic leaders? Because it is not in the nature of authentic leaders to take center stage or demand attention, they are easily overlooked. For authentic leadership and authentic leaders to be successful, some key organizational factors are necessary (May et al., 2003):
1. Organizations should select leaders who are personally motivated to be authentic in their actions.
2. Top management must provide strong support for such development efforts.
3. Performance metric systems for leaders must reflect the attributes of authentic leadership.

Yet being that authentic leadership is a new construct and that these organizational factors may not exist, is there a way in which a leader can develop into an authentic leader?

Continued development of authentic leadership has led to research on the various components of the new construct, such as authentic leader development and authentic followership. One strategy proposed for developing the authentic leader, is through the design and analysis of life-stories. It has been argued that authentic leadership depends on the self-relevant meanings that the leader associates with her or his life experiences, and that it is through life-stories that meanings are realized. Several scholars claim that personal narratives are people’s identities because life-stories represent an internal model of “who I was, who I am (and why), and who I might become” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

In this study, I have used an autobiographical framework with an auto-ethnographic design to write my own life-stories in an effort to answer the following questions:

- What are the meanings I am taking away from my life-stories?
- How do my life-stories help my authentic leader development?
- How is this notion of authentic leadership helping me understand what is happened to me professionally, to this date?
• What influence will this process have on who I might become?
• Can this strategy help others develop into authentic leaders?
Literature Review

The focus of this literature review is to give a brief overview of studies on authenticity, authentic leadership and authentic followership. A deeper overview is devoted to a particular strategy for authentic leader development, as it is through the strategy of life-stories that I approached my study. Further literature is integrated as needed to support my study as I proceed in the analysis of my own life-stories.

In the recent past, interest in a new construct of leadership has been growing. Unethical behaviors by corporate and government leaders prompted leaders like Bill George and Kevin Cashman to call for a new type of values-based leadership—authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011). Key scholars are working on various components of this new construct, regarding which F. Luthans and B.J. Avolio have become leading authorities. Luthans and Avolio built their initial model of authentic leadership based on perspectives of positive organizational behavior, full-range leadership/transformational leadership theory, and ethical perspective taking capacity and development (2003). The definition of authentic leadership within an organization can be summed up as “a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leadership is founded on the premise that in a period such as the present one, in which rules that formerly guided us are no longer effective, the most profoundly positive and negative leadership takes place (2003). Authenticity and authentic leaders are at the center of authentic leadership. At the base of all positive and socially constructive forms of leadership is authentic leadership (May et
al., 2003). If this then is the case, is there a need for a new construct of authentic leadership? Cannot the authentic base of existing leadership constructs simply be strengthened?

**Authenticity**

Authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy, meaning “to thine self be true” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). A more modern definition defines authenticity as “owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know ‘oneself’” (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Authenticity involves two parts—owning one’s personal values, thoughts, emotions and beliefs, and acting according to this ownership. “Thoughts and feelings must be consistent with actions” (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Authenticity includes both the embodied and intentional aspects of a leader’s enactment of his or her role (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Moreover, according to Erickson there are varying degrees of authenticity; it is not a case of either/or (Gardner et al., 2005). If this is true, then there is no metric for measuring the degree of one’s authenticity, which leaves one wonder the impact this has on authentic leadership. If there are varying degrees of authenticity, does this mean that there are varying degrees of authentic leadership? Kernis provides a more empirically grounded perspective on authenticity, one that is related to “optimal” self-esteem, and thus defines authenticity as “the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise” (Kernis, 2003). He identifies four components of authenticity: awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational authenticity. Kernis is not the only one to draw attention to the
relational aspect of authenticity. Ilies, Morgeson and Nahrgang make a case for it as well by showing that “authenticity on the part of leaders influences not only leaders’ own well-being, but also influences their followers’ well-being and self-concept” (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). In order for authenticity to produce a positive outcome, it must be acknowledged by the followers, accentuating its relational quality (Eagly, 2005).

Gardner et al. (2005) outline a conceptual framework that demonstrates the relationship between authentic leader and follower development. Based on this framework, Gardner et al. proceed to make a number of propositions (Appendix A). It is important to highlight these propositions because if authentic leadership is to be viewed as a viable new construct of leadership, each of these propositions must be tested and supported with data.
Fig. 1. The conceptual framework for authentic leader and follower development.

**Authentic Leader Development Through A Life-Stories Approach**

In an effort to identify authentic leadership as distinctive and useful, and also to differentiate it from other forms of leadership, Shamir and Eilam draw attention to terms that are not associated with other leadership models. They define authentic leaders and discuss the role of life-stories in the development of authentic leaders (2005). Based on
the generic dictionary definition of “authentic” as meaning “genuine”, “original”, and “not a fake”, Shamir and Eilam suggest four defining characteristics of authentic leaders:

1. Authentic leaders do not fake their leadership.
2. Relatedly, authentic leaders do not take on a leadership role or engage in leadership activities for status, honor, or other personal rewards.
3. Authentic leaders are originals, not copies.
4. Authentic leaders are leaders whose actions are based on their values and convictions.

In suggesting these four characteristics, Shamir and Eilam do not say anything about leadership style, which is different from other typologies of leaders. They also do not refer to the substance of the leader’s values or convictions. Theirs is a much narrower definition of authentic leaders than that of other authors. In their definition of authentic leaders and authentic leadership May et al. (2003) include morality among its major components: “Authentic leaders are more likely to apply moral principles and virtues to the situation to make sense of what action to take. Authentic leaders’ decisions are not based on what action is most self-serving or most popular, but are instead guided by a systematic evaluation of the alternatives available of what is fair or just and would do the least harm to one party over another” (May et al., 2003). The difficulty in morality and virtues lies in human subjectivity. What may be one person’s virtues or morals may not be another’s. Who is to say whose morals and virtues are better than or more correct than those of anybody else?

Based on the above four characteristics, Shamir and Eilam “define authentic leaders on the basis of their self-concepts and the relationships between their self-
concepts and their actions” (2005, p. 398) and attribute the following four qualities to authentic leaders:

1. The role of the leader is a central component of his or her self-concept.
2. A leader has achieved a high level of self-resolution or self-concept clarity.
3. A leader’s goals are self-concordant.
4. A leader’s behavior is self-expressive.

According to Shamir and Eilam’s definition, less authentic leaders can be distinguished from inauthentic leaders by “1) The degree of person-role merger, 2) The level of self-concept clarity and the extent to which this clarity centers around strongly held values and convictions, 3) The extent to which their goals are self-concordant, and 4) The degree to which their behavior is consistent with their self-concept” (2005, p. 399). Using terms such as “degree”, “level”, and “extent” sets a measure on the quantity of the characteristic, which recalls Erickson’s remark on the varying degrees of authenticity (Gardner et al., 2005). But Shamir and Eilam do not provide a metric for determining a precise degree, level or extent. Some form of measurement may be important for determining the degree, level, or extent to which an authentic leader is successful or impactful.

In alignment with the four characteristics and attributes of authentic leaders, Shamir and Eilam imply that there are four components to authentic leader development:

1. Development of a leader identity as a central component of the person’s self-concept.
2. Development of self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, including clarity about values and convictions.
3. Development of goals that are concordant with the self-concept.
4. Increasing self-expressive behavior, namely, consistency between the leader’s behaviors and the leader’s self-concept.

As leadership consists not only of leaders but also of followers, Shamir and Eilam define authentic followers as:

1. Followers who follow the leader for authentic reasons, that is, because they share the leader’s beliefs, values, convictions, concerns, and definition of the situation rather than due to coercion, normative pressures or expectation of personal rewards.
2. Followers who do not have illusions or delusions about the leader and do not follow the leader because such illusions provide them with a false sense of safety.
3. Followers who authenticate the leader. By that they mean:
   a. Followers who judge the leader’s claim for leadership as based on personally held deep values and convictions rather than mere conventions of an appointed office or the desire for personal power, status, or other benefits.
   b. Followers who judge the leader’s behaviors as consistent with his or her beliefs, values, and convictions.

It is important for Shamir and Eilam to clarify the authentic leader’s characteristics and attributes and to distinguish them from authentic followership if they are to come up with a strategy for developing authentic leaders. They focus on authentic leader development because authentic leadership is a far more complex and vast topic. The two authors also understand that authentic leaders are an important component of authentic leadership. In addition, authentic leaders are only effective as their influence on authentic followership hence resulting in authentic leadership. The theory of self-verification (Shamir & Eilam, 2005) supports this claim by stating “people associate self-verifying evaluations with feelings of authenticity and psychological coherence” (p. 401).
Shamir and Eilam argue that the way to develop authentic leaders is through the writing and sharing of leaders’ life-stories, and that it is through these stories that followers authenticate their leaders. Authentic leaders are defined as having self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, which Shamir and Eilam propose are realized through the development of their life-stories. “Life-stories express the storytellers’ identities, which are products of the relationship between life experiences and the organized stories of these experiences. Leaders’ life-stories are self-narratives” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005):

We shall employ the term “self-narrative” to refer to the individual’s account of the relationship among self-relevant events across time. In developing a self-narrative, the individual attempts to establish coherent connections among life events. Rather than seeing one’s life as simply ‘one damned thing after another’, the individual attempts to understand life events as systematically related. They are rendered intelligible by locating them in a sequence or ‘unfolding process’. One’s present identity is thus not a sudden and mysterious event, but a sensible result of a life-story (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

The importance of life-stories lies not in the facts, but rather in the meanings that the leaders take away from these life experiences (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2005). Leaders’ stories provide them with knowledge and clarity about their values and convictions.

Life-stories not only provide leaders with self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, they also justify who they are, identify why they are here and explain how and why they became leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This is supported by a study conducted by Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, and Adler (2005) in which they studied leadership development themes in leaders’ life-stories in order to analyze how leaders accounted for and justified
their leadership through these life-stories. Their goal was to look for broad leadership development themes that rise above particular contexts. Their data came from interviews with leaders and their published autobiographies. They held interviews with sixteen men in their 30s who were participating in an intensive leadership development course and had already been identified by their organizations as high performers with demonstrated leadership qualities. The ten autobiographies discussed in their study had been written by well known leaders in the political, military, and business worlds; their focus lay on the individuals’ early, formative years and to the point that they had assumed their leadership role and clearly established their identities. Using a narrative method to analyze the leaders’ stories, Shamir et al. sought the meaning of the stories from a leadership development point of view. Based on this study, Shamir et al. identified four major development themes or “proto-stories”:

- leadership development as a natural process,
- leadership development out of a struggle with difficulties,
- leadership development as self-improvement through learning
- leadership development as finding a cause (2005).

*Leadership development as a natural process*

This theme involves stories of leaders who are born to lead or who realize that they are meant to lead once an opportunity presents itself. Their stories present them as being unique and gifted from an early age. These leaders do not have to do anything special to become leaders; it is obvious from the outset that they are going to be leaders. Their leadership is non-contingent, or non-situation specific. This kind of person is
bound to be a leader throughout his/her whole life and in every respect, be it among family or friends, at school or at work. “The perception of being a natural leader provides a potential basis for authentic leadership as the terms natural and authentic are closely linked (as are the terms artificial and unauthentic)” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). A perception of natural leadership justifies the leadership role for two reasons. “First, if it is the leader’s fate to lead, it is the followers’ fate to follow. Second, the obviousness of the leader’s leadership and the fact that it has in many cases been manifested in his or her being ‘special’ in some respects from an early age provide ‘proofs’ that the leader indeed has the ability to lead” (Shamir et al., 2005).

Leadership development out of struggle

In contrast to the first theme, leaders whose stories involve leadership that emerges from a struggle identify themselves as having been born to disadvantaged families, low socio-economic status and/or a minority ethnic group. While struggling and overcoming their struggles, these leaders learn to deal with their issues on their own, to count on themselves, and to be independent. They learn to believe in themselves and be self-confident and overcome any obstacle. Through these struggles leaders discover their spirit to fight and their strength to cope under high levels of stress. Such leaders develop after undergoing at least one crucible, which Bennis and Thomas define as “a defining moment that unleashes abilities, forces crucial choices and sharpens focus” (Shamir et al., 2005). Leaders who develop from a struggle have the following leadership qualities: a strong will, self-confidence, proactivity, an ability to take on major challenges and cope with difficulties, independence, and toughness. Followers are able to identify with such
leaders thanks to their own struggles and the fact that these often contain a moral element. Usually there is an easier way of coping but the leader chooses the more difficult and more moral one. In addition, if the leader’s story represents a group struggle, the leader’s fate becomes the group’s fate.

*Leadership development as self-improvement through learning*

This theme also involves leaders who identify as life-long learners, ones who constantly analyze and learn from their life experiences. Moreover, they learn not only from their life experiences, but also from their role models. This means of leadership development may be key to self-justification and a leadership relationship with others. By sharing stories about how they have learned from role models, leaders are able to portray themselves as a follower and thus to benefit from that followership. In this way, leaders serve as role models for followers of the benefits of following leaders.

*Leadership development as finding a cause*

This theme mainly lies in the stories of political leaders who identified with a particular movement and found their direction through a political cause or ideological outlook. In such stories, the narrator is usually a key player in the movement and thus increases his chances of being identified as the leader and having others follow. Because the leader demonstrates such devotion to a cause, his or her leadership is justified and calls on followers to devote themselves similarly to the movement.

In the stories of non-political or organizational leaders, leadership occurs as part of career advancement. These leaders do not really identify themselves as leaders but as
individuals who fulfill a leadership role as a requirement of their position. They are not necessarily comfortable leading, and if they were leading, it is thanks to an external locus of causality (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Above and beyond the limitations of the study, as identified by Shamir et al, others arise from differences among stories, other possible interpretations of stories, and lack of a “control group.” Of the twenty-six leaders examined, only one was a female. The backgrounds of the autobiographies seem diverse, but how does that compare to the subjects? Would it have made a difference had the study included more women and a more diverse group? What about the arena of the leadership? Would the field of leadership make a difference? For instance, had this study involved solely leaders in education with equal numbers of male and female subjects of different racial backgrounds, would there be only four proto-stories? Would they have been the same proto-stories? Also, the study does not address the possibility of leadership development through multiple proto-stories or development themes.

Shamir and Eilam claim that all four themes serve as bases of authentic leadership (2005) and proceed to substantiate this claim by elaborating on stories that are not reported in the Shamir et al. (2005) study.

In contrast to traditional approaches to leadership development in which a leader’s life-stories are analyzed to help identify the events and experiences that contributed to his or her development, Shamir and Eilam “suggest that the events and experiences chosen by authentic leaders to appear in their life-stories reflect the leaders’ self-concepts and their concept of leadership, and allow or enable them to enact their leadership role” (2005, p. 407). It is not the actual events or experiences that develop self
and self-concept clarity. It is the meaning that the leader takes away from these experiences that influence his or her development as an authentic leader. “Life-stories are not testimonies to the objective events that happened, but the manifestation and expression of the events as perceived and interpreted by the individual that experienced them” (Widdershoven, 1993, p.2 as cited by Shamir et al., 2005). Telling a life-story requires highlighting certain participants and parts while ignoring others. This does not mean that the narrator is lying; rather, he or she is telling the truth by selecting and emphasizing certain events and participants for the purpose of finding meaning. By developing life-stories, the narrator explains and justifies who he/she is in the present.

In order to be designated as an authentic leader, an individual needs to be authenticated by followers. Shamir and Eilam point out that followers evaluate the life-story of the leader for coherence and believability. Instead of simply informing followers of the leader’s traits, values, and convictions, telling life-stories allow followers to assess the stories to explain and justify the leader’s authenticity. Through life-stories, followers can assess how similar the leader is to them. The more followers perceive the leader as having similar values, background, and other characteristics, the more followers are apt to view the leader as authentic. Moreover, by comparing the leader’s stories to those told about the leader by others, followers are able to confirm his or her authenticity. There is also the matter of how consistently the leader’s decisions and actions align with his or her life-stories. Aware of how his or her life-stories may affect followers, a leader may fabricate his or her stories to influence followers in his or her favor. Thanks to the various ways in which followers can authenticate life-stories and do so continuously, fabricating the truth gets harder and harder for leaders to get away with (Shamir & Eilam,
The one problem that Shamir and Eilam do not address is when and how leaders are to share their life-stories with their followers. This might too have an impact on the authenticity of leaders and their life-stories.

Shamir and Eilam shed light on the practical and research implications of their arguments. Traditional leadership development programs focus on the acquisition of new skills and behaviors, often through on-the-job experience, mentoring, and coaching (Day, 2000). Development through life-stories is very personal and, in order to be authentic, should take place naturally. Any attempt to develop as an authentic leader through training programs and the latest trends goes against the notion that authentic leaders do not follow trends. In order for authentic leader development to succeed, a leader has to choose to develop as an authentic leader. To force the process reduces authenticity. While we can assume all leaders wish to be authentic leaders, we can also assume that not all leaders wish to focus on becoming authentic leaders.

Although it is questionable whether authentic leader development can be guided or planned, it can be assisted (for those who choose so). Potential authentic leaders can receive support through a guided process of reflection. They can start by drawing a lifeline, identifying major events and turning points in their life, and then having a facilitator, a counselor or a researcher help them reflect on turning identified experiences “into the life story, such that the story, and identity, is revised or redirected” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This can happen close to the time of the experience or later in life (2005). This process of reflection takes time. Given the nature and circumstances of most leaders, however, finding time for reflection is nearly impossible. Many leaders report having time to work on their self-development only during periods of forced “time-outs”.

2005).
Since authentic leadership is a new construct, the development of authentic leaders is likewise new as it relates to authentic leadership. Shamir and Eilam make strong arguments for the role of life-stories in the development of an authentic leader. Although their work is based on research, it is still at the stage of an argument that requires substantiation and testing. One of the ways in which this can be done is by comparing various leaders’ life-stories and examining whether they contain specific leadership-related content. “Methods have to be devised to distinguish authentic stories from inauthentic stories and authentic leadership from inauthentic leadership” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Studies that determine the effects of leaders’ life-stories on followers and the followers’ responses to leaders’ life-stories are also needed. In addition, the cross-cultural generalizability of Shamir and Eilam’s argument needs to be investigated.

Authentic leadership, authentic leader development, and life-stories also have their critics. Responding to the work of Shamir et al. (2005), Gronn argued that according to the approach taken by Shamir et al. (2005), autobiographical narratives bear little or no relation to social reality because their approach is “textualized” and “decontextualized” (Shamir, 2005). Gronn also claims that there is no valid knowledge to be gained from studying a leader’s life-stories since these may have been corrupted to serve the purpose and/or need of the leader (Gronn, 2005). Finally, Gronn criticize Shamir et al. for not taking into consideration that leadership is distributed among many players. It could be argued, as it was by Shamir in his response, that Gronn’s criticisms are without merit and assume a narrow perspective. Cooper, Scandura and Schriesheim, in turn, caution researchers not to intervene in the development of authentic leaders before designing strategies for authentic leadership development. Specifically, scholars
need to consider four critical issues: (1) how to define and measure the construct, (2) how to determine the discriminant validity of the construct, (3) how to identify relevant construct outcomes, and (4) how to ascertain whether authentic leadership can be taught (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005).
III. Chapter Three - Scope of Study

Design

Leadership and leadership development is challenging work in any field. The field of education is no different. Unlike certain other fields, education deals directly with the lives of our most valuable asset, our children. It is therefore extremely important that school leaders have the moral capacity to withstand any and all dilemmas facing our education system at every level. One of the weaknesses of our educational system, however, is the lack of support for nurturing leadership development. An individual in a leadership position, be it formal or informal, is often left to his or her own devices to figure things out and make them work. On top of all that, he/she is faced with so many demands and deadlines that he/she has no time for reflection, processing, or growth. Leadership is not static; as we continue to experience life we continue to evolve. But regardless how we evolve, we must not forget who we are and where we came from in order to determine where we are going. I conducted this research in an effort to take time out and pursue my own authentic leader development.

This study is autobiographical. I selected various periods and events in my life to narrate my life-stories. As I analyzed them, I tried to understand why I selected those periods and events as well as their impact on my development as an authentic leader. The study is designed to answer the following questions:

- What are the meanings I am taking away from my life-stories?
- How do my life-stories help my authentic leader development?
- How is this notion of authentic leadership helping me understand what has happened to me professionally to this date?
- What influence will this process have on who I might become?
• Can this strategy help others develop into authentic leaders?

Although the study is autobiographical, it is a case study of me and relies on a narrative research method to gain insight into the issue(s) that have impacted my leadership thus far. The case study method focuses on the issues in the case while the narrative research method focuses on the case itself (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). I combined both methods to get a firmer understanding of myself as a case and the issue(s) impacting my development as an authentic leader. Case study research relies on multiple sources of data, while narrative research relies on the individual’s stories (Creswell et al., 2007). Through these various life-stories, I have built an in-depth contextual understanding of myself.

Methodology

This study embraces auto-ethnography as a research method. Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The researcher becomes the focus of the study as well as the one responsible for producing the product of the study. “Reflective thinking is ‘the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (past or present) in terms of self’” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005):

The process involves returning to the experience (replaying it in the mind and/or recounting it to others), attending to the feelings accompanying the experience and its memory, re-evaluating the experience, and drawing lessons from it. Through this process people learn about their strengths, weaknesses, motives and values and come in touch with their ‘true’ self in the sense of separating who they
are and who they want to be from what the world thinks they are and wants them to be (Bennis, 1992 as cited by Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

I used the narrative method to analyze life-stories. The narrative method views life-stories through three lenses in order to access the meaning that I attribute to my experience:

- individual description,
- explanation, and
- interpretation of actions and events (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Data

Data Sources

To address the research questions, I compiled and analyzed the following data:

- My personal and professional lifelines
- My selected life-stories
- Any personal notes that I wrote at the time of the events

Lifelines: Identification of major events and turning points makes leaders reflect on “events or circumstances in which they were presented with dilemmas or difficult choices and which provide them with an opportunity to learn from the choices made and the actions taken about their values, motivations, priorities, abilities, and shortcomings” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). I conducted a guided life review process with a facilitator prior to writing the lifelines of both my personal and professional life.
Life-stories: “Life-stories are not ‘free’ constructions, they are constrained by the events of life, but authentic leaders select the elements of the story to confer meaning on prior events—events that may not have had such meaning at the time of their occurrence” (Josselson, 1993 as cited by Shamir & Eilam, 2005). I wrote seven life-stories based not only on trigger events but also on positive events (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Trigger events are usually associated with negative experiences. Luthans and Avolio (2003) suggest that there is potential for leadership development in positive life events as well. “Positive jolts” (Spreitzer, 2006) refer to unexpected positive events that invoke positive emotions. “According to Fredrickson’s (1998; 2001) broaden-and-build theory, such emotions broaden people’s thought-action repertoire by creating a tendency to explore and take in new information and experiences and by enabling the person to envision even greater achievements in the future” (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Personal Notes: Because my life-stories are recollections of past events as I remember them in the present, notes written at the time of the event may offer a different perspective during the analysis phase of the study.

Data Analysis

Using the narrative method, I analyzed each story by viewing it through all three lenses as well as by identifying as a development theme or proto-story. In doing so, I also analyzed each story according to Gardner et al.’s conceptual framework. This revealed how helpful it was or was not, particularly in the case of the life-stories approach to authentic leader development. To search for deeper meanings and more
informative interpretations, I also referred to resources such Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky’s *Leadership On The Line*, and James H. Lytle’s *Working For Kids*. 
IV. Chapter Four - Life-Stories

The Unknown Trigger Event that Led Me To Education

(Why I chose to teach.)

I cannot say that I wanted to be a teacher my whole life. As a matter of fact, I never wanted to be a teacher and was discouraged from becoming one by one of my adopted mothers. She felt it was a lowly field and a profession that did not pay well. Yet my biological mother had made the ultimate sacrifice so that I could benefit from an American education. Looking back at my life, I feel that my life journey was a preparation for a lifetime of service to our children. It was thanks to my experiences, struggles, and triumphs that I gained such love and respect for our youth. Just as I had no choice in losing my father or being given up for adoption, none of our children have a choice in the circumstances in which they find themselves. Nonetheless as a teenager I chose to leave my adopted home because I could no longer stand the verbal abuse. I thus soon learned that the responsibility and the choice of who we choose to become is our own. Once I was introduced to the possibility of teaching as a profession, I saw it as my obligation to help our children understand their worth, power, and responsibility to grow up and choose to be the best they can be. I learned this through my own struggles as a defeated fifteen-year-old stripped of every ounce of self worth. Instead of giving up, I chose to keep going. I turned myself over to social services to seek assistance. Today children are either placed with or taken up by social services; their experiences can be worse or better than mine. And though they may not be identical to mine, I have an understanding of what life with social services can be like for many of my students.
I was immediately placed in an emergency shelter where I met a misfit crew with various reasons for why they were there. In that I found a sense of belonging. After a short stay, I was placed in a foster home—a white family with cheerful, privileged white girls—where everything felt fake. I had no feelings against them; I simply did not feel that I belonged. When my social worker told me that I could go back home to my adopted mothers as long as I behaved better, I took her up on the option even though I knew I was not the one that needed to behave better. It was one of my mothers who needed to stop being cruel. But I went back and tried to make it work. I was not sure what I was supposed to do differently. I did everything I was told to do. Yet I still found myself being constantly punished for something. There was no pleasing this mother. I did not mind anything I had to do, but could not tolerate the verbal abuse. She was always demeaning me, calling me names, and telling me how worthless I was. I could not understand it. So after a few months, I left again with my black garbage bag containing some clothes and a few of my belongings. This black bag would become my suitcase for a while.

I returned back to the emergency shelter and was eventually placed in another foster home. This family was definitely of a different (lower) class than the first one. They also made it clear that they took in foster children for the money and help around the house. It was awful. I remember them as dirty and greasy. One day I got home five minutes late from the summer enrichment program that I was attending and they wanted to make me work an hour for each minute as punishment. While I felt some form of punishment was appropriate for being late, five hours was unjust. So I took off and ran away. This was the first of many times that I ran away. Each time I would eventually
end up back at the emergency shelter, so each time I was placed in a foster home, I would run away. I spent days and weeks on the streets, staying with friends when their parents were gone, or sleeping in cars or abandoned trailer homes. It got pretty cold during the winter months. But I made every effort to go to school whenever possible. I knew that I had to graduate from high school. My grades were not very good and they definitely were not a reflection of my true intellectual ability. Grades are often less a reflection of our intelligence than a reflection of our efforts. At least that is what I learned.

There were more stays at the emergency shelter and more stays on the streets before I received permission from a court judge to be emancipated. I was able to prove to the judge that I was going to school and holding several jobs. I had just turned seventeen. I guess social services was tired of sending the police and state troopers after me and having me overstay my limit at the emergency shelter. They did not oppose my request, and I became an emancipated minor. Finally, I felt free. I had no place to live so I moved in with a friend’s family for awhile until I could figure out where to live permanently. Eventually I found a little shack that I could afford to rent, and for the first time, I had a home of my own. It was a dive but it was mine.

Even though it was difficult, being on my own provided a little more stability than traveling between the shelter, foster homes, and the street. I managed to graduate from high school and started working on rebuilding my self-esteem. This took years but I stayed at it. So when I had a chance to impact children’s lives through education, I knew my purpose in life. The struggles I endured granted me empathy for my students. Most importantly, I developed compassion as well as a passion for serving our children. In time, I would dedicate my career to providing equitable access to quality education and
opportunities for all our children, especially those of color and lower socio-economic status. Through it all, I have always reminded them of their value, uniqueness, and responsibility to grow up and realize their purpose in life. At the same time, I have been trying to remind adults of their responsibility to take better care of all our children, regardless of biology. There is no greater gift than our children.
The Early Years

I was young, carefree, and living in the moment. I was only five—not one of those children who knew what she was going to be when she grew up. The importance of education was the furthest thing from my mind, but it is amazing how quickly things change. Once my father was killed and I was given up for adoption solely for the sake of obtaining a good education, I learned the hard way what people will do for an education. Mothers will give up children. So my stakes were already high when I was adopted by an American family. Before leaving Korea, I was told by my mother that as long as I was good, I would get everything I wanted. So my seven-year-old mind envisioned getting everything I wanted if I were good and my body turning into a heap of bones if I were not good. In that visual, was an element of fear. It became all-important to me to please my new adopted mothers, especially the cruel one. This included getting straight A's in school and doing whatever I was told to do. It was made clear to me that I was to grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer; anything else was not an option. My passion was dance and I wanted to become a Broadway dancer. My cruel adopted mother told me they make no money and that was the end of that. The first time I saw a judge was when I became an American citizen, and because one of my moms was an anesthetist, I saw doctors each time I visited her at the hospital. I also attended a Catholic school from grades three to eight and many of my classmates' fathers were doctors. There was no doubt I was going to grow up to become a doctor or a lawyer.

Making it through high school was a feat in itself considering I spent those years maneuvering my way through foster homes, shelter stays, and living on the streets. Needless to say, my barely passing grades hardly qualified me for college, never
mind concentrations in pre-med or pre-law. But after taking a college course or two, I
enrolled in a local private college, where I started off as a biology major and a chemistry
minor. I loved it. Learning new information, especially about the human body fascinated
me, and thinking pushed my brain. It was in my inorganic chemistry class that I met the
gatekeeper. The professor, a nun, felt that I was not cutting it and strongly advised that I
consider a different major. This was devastating. As I was increasingly in debt, I took a
year off from college to rethink my future. What else was there for me to do? It had
been engrained in my head throughout my American life that I was going to be a doctor
or a lawyer. I had a desire and love for medicine but I was being told that it was not for
me. Had this happened a couple of years later, I would not have listened to the nun and
worked my way through it. I would have had the confidence to defy her.

It was my mentor who suggested that I consider becoming a teacher. Her
observations of me since I had been a young child led her to believe that I was a natural
teacher. By fifth grade I was a student assistant teacher at my dance school. That was
how I earned payment for my dance classes. It was not that my adopted mothers could
not afford to pay for lessons, my cruel mom simply wanted to discourage me from
dance. Regardless, I found a way to keep dance in my life, and in doing so, had taught
dance since I was 11 years old through college (with a few years off during high school,
when I did not dance at all). I had a way of being able to teach even the most challenged
dancer. I had a way of breaking down combinations, and with great patience build
confidence in dancers of all ages—from pre-school to adults—as they learned
routines. That came naturally to me.

I had never thought about teaching as a profession. According to my cruel
adopted mother, it was a lowly field. But I looked into it at the two local state colleges, the one in my hometown, and the one in the neighboring town/state. The university in the neighboring state was known for having a better teacher preparatory program, so that was where I applied. Once I was accepted, I looked into secondary and elementary education and asked my advisor how to go about choosing because I was interested in both. He told me that secondary was about content, while elementary was about the child. This made it very easy for me because there was no doubt in my mind as to why I was going into education. To me it was all about the child. So I decided that I would major in elementary education with minors in math and science since as a former biology major, I had taken so many courses in these two fields. Although teaching had never entered my mind, now that I was in it, it felt right. While the academic rigor, which I missed, was not the same, I knew that I had found my calling. There were no fireworks or bells, just a feeling that I had telling me that this was it. Of course, all this was very disappointing to my adopted mothers, and it took courage to go against their wishes, but I sold it as becoming a doctor of the mind as opposed to a doctor of the brain. (I had been interested in neurosurgery.) I also resolved to take my career path beyond teaching and earn a doctorate in education. Whatever I chose to do, I was going to do at the highest level. But it was important to me that I experience each level of career advancement. I wanted to teach, obtain my master’s degree in administration, become an administrator for a while, and only then go for a doctorate. I felt that it was important to walk in the shoes of those whom I would lead one day. Having been there and done that would grant me greater credibility and a better understanding of the challenges and possibilities faced by people. Although such a course may not be necessary it was very valuable in my
opinion.

Now that I knew what I was studying, it was a matter of figuring out a schedule to maximize time and opportunities. I knew that I wanted to do my student teaching in the fall rather than the spring. I do not recall how I knew, but somehow I did know how important it was to start the school year in such a way as to set the tone of learning expectations and culture for a successful year. Also, having taken two years off between high school and college, I was eager to graduate and start teaching. With permission, I was able to double up on a couple classes, student teach in the fall, and finally graduate with a job in the spring. The work I did with my local school district during my college years offered me relationships and experiences, and made me a strong candidate for job openings. I served as the vice president of the community’s Asian Pacific Advisory Board as well as a representative on the district’s Desegregation/Integration Advisory Council. I was allowed to choose the vacancy of my choice and I chose to teach first grade at the district’s music magnet school. Besides kindergarten, first grade is a very important and impressionable year because it sets the tone for the rest of a child’s school career.

Then came the moment when they appeared in class. In front of me were twenty little people from a variety of backgrounds, looking to me to teach them. Some did not even know the sounds of alphabetical letters, and I was responsible for teaching them to read and write. College courses had not taught me how to do that at this level. We had focused on teaching students who already had a grasp of reading and writing. If I did not get this right, the academic experience of these students could be ruined. While there were three other teachers in my cohort with varying years of experience, I reached out to
our district reading specialist. She came to my classroom and modeled a lesson. After that I was set to go. This district had a new teacher induction program that not only offered typical benefits and union information, but also classes on classroom management. This was when I was first introduced to Harry Wong and his concepts, which I use to this day.

After the model lesson, I was able to prepare lessons that held the students to high expectations, and I went above and beyond the level of instruction required by the city and state. It was not so much what I taught that was different, but rather the way in which I taught. For instance, I took a holistic approach to reading with a heavy emphasis on writing. When it came to adding and subtracting, I started out by using shapes to represent missing numbers then gradually replaced them with letters to represent variables. With science and social studies, I had students generate questions, do research to find answers, and worked through the steps of the writing process to create at least five-paragraph essays. My students understood concepts in much greater depth than did first graders in the other classrooms. They also performed much higher on the standardized test they were required to take. Before entering second grade, my first graders had been introduced to algebra and the scientific method, and most were reading at a third-grade level. Even ones who had more difficulty were definitely reading at grade level. This was crucial fact that I proved to myself. I had always held high expectations for myself and people in general. But my first year of teaching confirmed my belief that when held to high expectations and shown how to reach them, our children were capable of far more than we give them credit for. I learned that the problem lay in our education system, which has set low expectations and limits on student advancement. But I also
learned that, as long as I could get my students to do well in the classroom in a lawful manner, the school and district did not care how I did it. This also caused friction between my colleagues and me because I learned that going above and beyond was not expected or appreciated by them or sometimes even administrators.

During my first year of teaching, I was also involved in school activities. I helped organize a school-wide event to increase student awareness of the importance of voting. I also helped organize a school-wide talent show. This allowed for collaboration with colleagues outside my cohort. Although I was only a first year teacher, I was able to show my leadership by bringing people together to get things done. The days were long but the work was rewarding. More than ever, I gained a deep love and respect for children. I knew I had found my calling. I would serve our children, giving them access to the best and pushing them to a potential that they had never foreseen. My first year proved to me what was possible.
Transition To Urban And High School

Once I found education as my calling, I wanted to teach in an urban school district. For many reasons, I never did fit in a Midwest town; there was always a part of me that longed to be in a city. After graduating from college, I had planned on moving to the east coast for two reasons. First it was closer to Harvard, and secondly, it was much more urban than my childhood Midwest town. After hearing about the need for teachers of color, especially in urban districts, I thought it would be easy to get a job. After all, I am Korean with teaching certifications in math and science. But that proved not to be the case. The application process was not clear-cut; after submitting my materials, I received no indication that they had been received. It was a teacher of color recruitment fair organized by suburban schools in the greater metro area that forwarded me an opportunity to interview with a number of districts outside of the city. I was offered several positions within two different districts. I chose the position that allowed me to teach first grade again. It was only my second year of teaching, and since I was moving to a new district, I wanted to keep at least one common ground. While this was not the city, it got me closer.

My second year of teaching was similar to my first. I set expectations high, teaching above and beyond what was outlined by the district and the state. Amazingly, the first graders met every expectation. The difference in this district, which was more affluent than the one of my previous school, was that students came to school with an increased awareness of academics. They knew their letters and sounds, if upon entry they were not already reading. They had stronger sense of numbers and generally a greater awareness of many more topics. Once again I had proven to myself that the standards of
our educational system were stifling our students’ capabilities. Another difference between this district and my former one was the reaction of parents, teachers, and the principal. In my first district, there was very little reaction from anyone outside my classroom. Parents were simply happy that their children were learning, other teachers kept doing what they had always done, and the principal was glad things were going well. But in this new district, parents realized how much their children were learning, as compared to their neighbor’s children in other first grade classrooms. They brought the matter up at the school committee meetings and discussed it at their gatherings. This brought what was going on in my classroom to the attention of many more parents, teachers, and my principal. The other parents began asking why their children were not doing the same things in their classes. This upset the other first-grade teachers, who began discretely suggesting that I stick to what I was required to teach and at the level outlined. The principal did not appreciate that at school committee meetings the positive attention was directed at me rather than at her. This came across in her displeasure at seeing what I was doing in my classroom. Regardless, I kept pushing my students. I felt it immoral to hold children back just to appease the adults, regardless of their reasons. Had I felt that I was doing something wrong or harmful, then absolutely I would have stopped. But the children were flourishing and loving it.

The district acknowledged my method of teaching reading by asking me to provide professional development for other teachers. As a second year teacher, I felt honored to be able to share my approach with veteran teachers willing to learn from a newbie. While I had designed new programs for children at my previous district, this
was the first time I had the opportunity to teach adults. The experience was successful, and I enjoyed the difference between teaching adults and teaching children.

The following year, I experienced the consequences of keeping students’ abilities stifled and bounded by low expectations. While teaching in the suburbs, I kept on trying to find my way into the urban district. I had heard of an innovative headmaster who was doing all kinds of things in his own way. I thus arranged to meet him and introduce myself. He was the headmaster of a high school. Since my teaching certification only went up to grade 9, I knew that it did not qualify me to teach at the high school level. It did not matter; I wanted to meet him anyway. I took my resume and simply showed up at the school in case he did decide to make time to meet me. The response I received was a harsh “I have no time…” So I dropped off my resume and left. That was in early spring.

I returned to my suburban district and began preparing to switch to the middle school. (I really felt the tension from the principal because I was not complying with and doing what the other first grade teachers were doing.) Later, in August, I received a phone call from the high-school headmaster. He was rummaging through the pile of resumes and came across mine with an undergraduate degree and teaching certifications that peaked his interest. I guessed that on the east coast most colleges did not bestow Bachelors in Science for teaching, and certifications were not broken down as mine was. I had a B.S. in Elementary Education with minors in math and science. My teaching certifications were in elementary, grades one through six, and middle school math and science, grades five through nine. I went in my t-shirt and shorts to meet the headmaster thinking it was simply for conversation. By the end of our meeting, he had offered me a job, teaching ninth grade algebra. Later I learned that I would be the Literacy Specialist since that was
the actual vacancy available. Innovative as he was, the headmaster took the opportunity
to hire me to meet the needs for his school while complying minimally with the district
requirements. The Literacy Specialist was to teach a maximum of only two classes while
supporting other teachers. I was given a full teaching load while serving as the liaison to
the district in the capacity of Literacy Specialist. As a third-year teacher and a first-year
teacher in a completely new situation, that was all I had time to do.

The headmaster was trying something new at the school, and I was part of a team
of new teachers that he was building. He structured the school into upper and lower
schools, with the lower school being broken down into eight units, four each in grades
nine and ten. Each unit had five teachers, one for every major content area plus one for
supplemental support and up to thirty students per class. Each unit also had a leader; ours
was the headmaster. Due to this set-up, my unit was more susceptible to ridicule from
other teachers as they referred to us as the headmaster’s favorites. He gave us more time
and attention and made sure that we had as much teaching materials as possible. He also
advised us to stay away from the veteran teachers. He did not want us tainted by the
bitterness that can overcome teachers who had been in the business a long time.

I finally made it to an urban district but had no idea what that really meant other
than that I would have a more diverse student body. I was to learn very quickly what an
urban district meant. I got the job in early August, and less than a month later, I had to be
ready to teach ninth grade algebra. I was going from an affluent suburb teaching first
grade to an urban high school. This was a drastic change. But I stuck to my
fundamentals. Keep my expectations high; show them how to meet in a safe
environment of mutual respect, structure, and consistency. Things are very rarely that simple, but they are doable.

The first day of school came and so did the freshmen. I looked out at my class, and the room was full of black students, many taller and bigger than I was and most definitely much, much louder than what I was used to. Even considering the fact that it was the first day and a lot of them did not know each other since they had come from all over the city and a number of middle schools, they were loud. I panicked for a split second when, before saying anything to the class, I did a three hundred sixty degree turn to get my mind in order and start class. Before I introduced myself, I ordered the class in a stern voice to be quiet, to open their textbooks, and to start working on an assignment. The classroom became silent; amazingly enough, they listened. I was pleasantly surprised. Well, one thing was clear. I was the teacher in that classroom and now everyone knew it.

It would not take long but it was a process that had to be followed if I were going to create the type of classroom that would nurture risk-taking, hard work, and success. I closely adhered to Harry Wong’s concepts and most importantly, took the time to show my respect to the students and build relationships with each of them. From the very beginning, there were no discipline issues in my classroom. The students knew I worked hard for them, and that I expected them to work hard for themselves. The students knew I believed in them.

I kept pushing myself to learn and try new ideas that would benefit the students. This included changing the grading system. Before I learned from any other teacher in the school or district that failure was not an option, I implemented and then adapted to
better suit my students a grading system that I had read about in Jon Saphier and Ron Gower’s *The Skillful Teacher*. I was well on my way.

My start was fairly smooth. Although I understood why I had always longed for an urban district, (I felt as though I had more in common with these high school students) a couple of my colleagues in the unit did not feel the same. The greatest challenge, of course, was classroom management. The teachers were unable to teach, and spent most of their days trying to keep the class under control. These teachers had never taught before, and the focus of their college education had been more on content than on teaching. During our common planning time each day, we therefore discussed their concerns and came up with systems to try and support them. The unit leaders usually led the common planning-time meetings. Since our leader was the headmaster and was busy running the school, the responsibility fell mainly on the ELA teacher and myself. It was either sink or swim, and I was determined to swim. We did the best we could to support each other and, whenever possible, I shared my ideas and systems with the other teachers. But this was not enough for the science teacher. Within a couple of months into the school year, he quit. This made it even more difficult to provide our unit of students the stability and consistency they needed. This led to more changes and challenges for me.

Trying to replace the science teacher, the headmaster found a qualified math teacher instead. Because I had qualifications to teach ninth grade science as well as math, the headmaster had me switch from algebra to integrated science and had the new teacher take over my math classes. This worked for a few more months, until the new math teacher quit. By now it was getting close to standardized testing time and our ninth graders had had limited math and science instruction. There was a new math teacher
willing to start, but on the condition that he would not be left alone in the classroom with
the students. In an effort to prepare the students for the standardized tests, I agreed to
combine both classes and teach both math and science with the support of the new math
teacher. This meant ninety-six minute periods with sixty students in one large classroom
while teaching an integrated math and science curriculum that I had to design. I agreed
to do this for one month, until the testing period. Beyond that I felt it would become
babysitting rather than teaching.

It was that month that I was attacked by one of my students. A student from an
earlier class was trying to get into my classroom to fight with another student. When I
refused to let the student in, he went after my throat with both arms, trying to choke me.
I had always wondered what I would do if I were attacked, and I proved to myself that I
think about boxing. The student was taller than I was and had the advantage of a longer
reach with his arms. If I wanted to have any chance of preventing him from choking me,
I would have to take away his advantage. In a split second I processed this and reached
for his forearms and got him to bend them as I took him down to the ground. Neither of
us ended up hurt. While this was happening, the other math teacher left the room and
students came to my rescue. There was one student in particular who jumped over tables
and ran from the back corner of the room to come to my aid. It was he who was the
angriest at the math teacher for leaving the room. He did not understand how the teacher
could run out instead of helping me, especially since he was a man. I explained to the
students that the math teacher had to leave the room to get help. There was no phone in
the room and there was no other way to get security. This explanation seemed to appease
the students a little, but they still thought the math teacher had been cowardly. Needless
to say, I did not want to press charges nor did I want the student expelled. The unit teachers had worked hard with this student and he had come a long way. We did not want to lose all that progress by sending him off to the school where all expelled students went. I was glad when the month was over.

As my first year of teaching at the high school came to an end, I had opportunities to attend a number of training sessions for the district’s literacy specialists. I received training to coach, engage in team facilitation, and teach literacy across all content areas. I also had opportunities to represent the headmaster at events and out-of-state school visits. In doing so, I met a number of other school leaders and they got to know me. I was beginning to build a reputation of being a quality teacher and teacher leader. This happened especially after a classroom visit by the superintendent and his top leadership team along with consultants from New York City who had come to observe my teaching. They were more than impressed with my teaching and with the students’ learning and work. In spite of all these challenges, long hours, successes, and failures, it was well worth it all. This was only my first year of teaching high school.
Starting A New Small School

The small schools initiative funded by the Gates Foundation was in full effect as two more large high schools were being broken down into small schools. Parkway High School had a reputation of being the school for the white students of the city. There were not many complaints about student performance, but it was known for cronyism. The school had a student population of about one thousand and four hundred and was going to be broken down into four small schools. Roosevelt High School was one of the lower performing schools in the district with a reputation for teachers who went there to retire. Approximately one thousand and one hundred students were going to be broken up into three schools. At the time, I was serving as one of three assistant headmasters at Roosevelt High School. I took this opportunity to pull together a team to design a proposal for one of the small schools.

We designed a business-themed high school since the request for proposals required that the schools be theme-based. The school design included rigorous college preparatory courses, internships, dual enrollment, and partnerships with local businesses, higher education institutions, and a national organization that supported our focus. It was a complete program with complete curricula. It differed from the other business-themed school proposal designed by a team at Parkway. I saw that proposal later and learned that it was a shell rather than a comprehensive proposal such as the one designed by my team. Needless to say, it was the proposal by the Parkway team that was selected as one of the seven new small schools. The team leader of that design was a well-connected white male who had started out as a teacher and moved up to administration. He was considered one of the members of the “old white boys’ network” that plagued Parkway
High. It was clear to me why his proposal was selected over our proposal. Our team consisted of representatives from all required stakeholders as stated in the RFP, but no one with clout or membership in any group that would have given us an edge over our competition.

The headmaster of the new business-themed small school was the lead designer of the school. I had met him several times before at district meetings and knew of him but could not really say I knew him well. After hearing about my team’s proposal, the headmaster reached out to me asking if I would be interested in joining his team as number two of the school leadership team. We met at a local restaurant and I listened to how Parkway had been broken down. It went down seniority lines; the teachers got to choose which school they wanted to join or if they wanted to leave the complex altogether. The headmaster had been one of the assistant headmasters of Parkway and the only administrator who was going to move up to the rank of headmaster. The headmasters of the other three small schools were still unknown at the time that teachers had to choose their school assignment for the following year. The teachers chose the leadership they knew and most of the veteran teachers chose to teach at the new business-themed small school, Global Business Academy (GBA).

The headmaster was easygoing and not into micro-management, which was important because I knew I did not perform well under those who were. I am not sure when I realized this about myself, but I knew that autonomy made me do best. I listened to the headmaster in order to see what he was looking for in me and why he thought I would be the right person. Part of why he felt that I was the right person lay in my role in designing the other business-themed school proposal. He knew that I had an interest and
knowledge. While he did not explicitly say so, I knew it also helped him, a white male, to have diversity on his team. But he did state that I would have the flexibility and authority to play a major role in more clearly defining the school, primarily in the curricular areas, which he confessed were a weak link in the school’s design. This was understandable considering the teaching staff he had acquired. Since the teachers had chosen Global Business Academy based on an administrator rather a school theme, they lacked the background to teach business electives.

I shared with the headmaster my vision for what his school could become; it was actually based on my team’s school design. He was open and agreeable and I therefore felt that I could be of use and support in helping launch Global Business Academy. I had only been an administrator for a few years and had focused on key areas, but this opportunity afforded me access to all aspects of developing and running a school. The possibility excited me and reminded me of the type of work I love best. I was actually to have direct influence on providing our students with equitable access to quality education and opportunities. I was reinvigorated and reminded of why teaching was my life calling. Even though it was a lateral move, I felt it was the right career move.

Although human resources slotted me as an assistant headmaster, my official title was Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. In actuality, my job went far beyond its title. Being that it was a small school, there were only three administrators, so I served in every capacity. First I had to make sure that the master schedule structure was in place. Then I had to strengthen the business theme of the school. I therefore analyzed the teaching staff and what they could teach that was related to business. I did this through conversations with the headmaster and the teachers. Wherever it was appropriate,
courses were created to fit teacher abilities and the school theme. But all this was not nearly enough to meet the needs of students who were there to get a quality business education. Due to retirements, there were a couple openings with flexibility. We hired teachers specifically to beef up our business theme. We were able to hire career changers from the finance world as math teachers. Due to their finance background, they were able to teach the business courses provided by the national partner.

The national organization partnered with schools across the country to help develop career academies focused on a particular theme. This was a partner with whom I was familiar from my work at Roosevelt High School and had also been written into my school design proposal. Among other things, one of the benefits of this partnership was an industry-backed curriculum. We did not have to spend time creating all new curricula; we made the modifications required for district approval with the support of our district liaison. The partnership supported our partnership with a local organization that aligned schools with business partners. This helped us meet some of our financial needs and our need for internships and other career readiness-related experiences such as job shadowing, resuming writing, and interview skills. The business theme portion of the new school was strong. The focus now turned to core academics.

Part of the affordability and nuance of the small school model lay in creating humanities courses in lieu of English language arts and social studies. This posed a challenge since the teachers were reluctant to accept this change. Our teachers were set in their content areas and used every ounce of their union power to fight the change. Being that it was a small school initiative requirement, we had no other choice but to implement the humanities requirements. So, working with the headmaster and learning
from him how to maneuver through the challenges of working with the union, we developed a compromise. In order to do so, I explained to the teachers what we were required to do by the small school initiative and the district. I asked them about their concerns. By listening to them I learned they were worried that they would have to teach content outside their subject area. Knowing this allowed me to create a solution that the teachers were willing to accept even though it meant stepping out of their comfort zone and one that also met the district requirement. The teachers were not happy but they were accepting and willing to try. We made sure to provide support, time, and the materials required for their success. In the end, one of the teachers decided to leave the school a year later in order to teach solely in her content area rather than a hybrid humanities course. At least this was her choice and occurred after an effort had been made to make it work on all sides. Different practices are often used to drive teachers out.

One of the advantages granted us was autonomy at the school level to do what was necessary in the best interest of the students and teachers. Decisions regarding the curriculum and new program development were made at the school level albeit with district approval. But we were not told what to do by the district and forced to carry out their demands. This allowed the headmaster and me to collaborate with the teachers when making changes. It was an opportunity to try and get things right by creating a school that had the students’ best interest at heart. So I took the autonomy I was given by my headmaster to do as much as possible.

We realigned course sequences in order to increase students’ preparation for passing state exams. We created additional courses to provide students more support in
areas in which data revealed student weaknesses. We created opportunities for students to take college level courses and to participate in paid internships. I focused not only on opportunities for students, but also for teachers. I knew that it was important for teachers to see their importance in the development of the school and student learning. Above and beyond the regular professional development I had to plan and implement, I created opportunities for those willing to go above and beyond.

Analysis of our student data showed that our seniors were not passing the college placement exam, especially in mathematics. So partnering with a local college, I created an opportunity for our high school math teachers to collaborate with the college math professors and conduct a curriculum analysis at both levels to create a nine through fourteen vertically aligned math curriculum co-taught by teachers and professors. To connect students’ class work with real life, I partnered with a non-profit organization that sent a person to teach an accounting class that allowed students to test for a certificate to help prepare taxes. In return, students volunteered time during tax season to assist low-income families file their taxes.

All this was above and beyond overseeing the entire curriculum, instruction, and assessments for the school. I was working morning, noon, night, and weekends. When I was not in school, I was out networking in the community to make connections in order to create partnerships. I had actually created another job by doing what I was doing. Thus with the headmaster I actually created a new position for the school the following year. The Director of College and Career Partnerships was a fancy title that we invented to reflect the focus of my work. In actuality, the funds came from a position that other schools were using for their disciplinarian. We had minimal issues when it came to
discipline, which I handled along with the headmaster, so we did not need to hire a person for that role. Eventually other schools created this director position, trying to replicate what we were doing at Global Business Academy.

While I was still the main person initiating new partnerships, I had a colleague who would follow up so that my time could be spent on other things, which included creating an international studies program that took students to London to connect with high school students there who were also attending a business-themed high school. The program allowed students a job shadowing experience, a stock exchange simulation, and a lecture at a university, plus much more. This required connecting with business people, professors, and educators in another country, traveling overseas to coordinate and plan, and fundraising at home to make all this happen.

At the same time, I was looking for grant opportunities for the school and its teachers in order to continue pushing the school to develop and grow in the right direction. We were the only high school in the district to apply for a grant to support teacher action research based on student data analysis in order to improve student instruction. While I went ahead to apply for the grant, I needed the teachers to buy in since it was they who needed to conduct the research. It helped that the grant allowed teacher participants to work toward their administrator’s license. I used this as leverage to reach out to a core team of teachers who I knew were interested in the administrator’s path. Thankfully the team jumped on board and began learning how to conduct action research on student data analysis and using the information to create action steps for improving instruction and student learning. The teachers in turn led teams of other teachers during professional development in order to spread the practice school-wide.
The students also became a part of the solution for meeting the requirements of the small school initiative. There was supposed to have been an advisory program but the union resisted, stating that it was a change in working conditions that required teachers to teach an additional class. To find a creative solution, I created a student-led advisory. Upper classmen volunteers were trained to be “Seven Habits of Teens” facilitators. They led lower classmen in activities that focused on these seven habits while teachers who did not want to participate could merely be present in the classrooms. Teachers who were willing to participate could actively support the students and be engaged as well. It was not ideal and could have improved over time, but for the time being sufficed. It did, however, create a culture in which students were valued and important in what we were doing. Overall, the culture was positive. After hearing about all that was going on at the school and the opportunities that students had, many thought it was either a charter or private school.

Parents were happy to have their children attend Global Business Academy. When students were sent out of local Catholic or charter schools, they tried to get into GBA. I attribute the school culture to the combination of my style with the headmaster’s style. He was the laid-back one, politicking behind the scenes with the necessary players to keep them in the know while making way for me to do what I was doing. The understanding and custom was that I would not make any decisions on my own without the headmaster’s approval. I also made sure that the headmaster always knew what was going on so that he could speak about it confidently. We worked as partners and the headmaster always made sure to give me credit for my work. I, in turn, made sure that people knew he was the headmaster.
These years were not all peaches and cream, however. The headmaster and I did have our differences. When we did, I shared my perspective, and as long as he did not ask me to compromise my sense of ethics or morals, I followed up on his decisions. Only once was I told to do something that went against my ethics and refused to do it. It resulted in a heated conversation. I walked out stating that if he wanted me to do that, I would quit. When I returned to work the next day, he told me I had been right and that he had no right to ask me to do what he had. We never spoke about that incident again. But it was a sign to me that maybe I had done everything I could at GBA. It was starting to feel as though it was time for me to move on and look for an opportunity to run my own school.
My Own School

After the successful years at Global Business Academy, I felt ready to lead my own school. It was important to me that it be a large high school because I wanted the challenge. I was a finalist for a large high school in a neighboring town but did not get it due to my lack of headmaster experience in a large high school. But I used the finalist position as leverage to obtain an interview at a large high school in my district. I interviewed with a large committee at Castle Hill High School (CHHS) and followed up with interviews with different stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, and families—once I became a finalist. In the end, the CHHS team and the Academic Superintendent of High Schools (ASHS) decided that I was by far the best candidate to take on the role as new headmaster of CHHS. So on the first of July, I started implementing my entry plan according to Barry Jentz’s template. I created a survey for the faculty and staff to gather some information and perspectives. I held voluntary one-on-one conversations with over twenty-five percent of the faculty and staff. Although I started implementing the entry plan, I did not get to complete the process. So far, transitions to new positions had not resulted in my fully planning and implementing an entry plan.

Given the structural organization of the faculty and staff, there definitely were some concerns that affected the instructional requirements made available to students. There was only one world language teacher for over twelve hundred students. Over two sections, about sixty students, needed Spanish in order to graduate that year. Without this the students could not meet their graduation requirements. Expecting more budget cuts the next year despite needing two additional world language teachers, I had to find a
different option than asking for more money, especially if there was an internal option.
And I noticed one.

In most other high schools, discipline was taken care of by Community Field Coordinators (CFCs). At CHHS, four full-time educators took on this role. Looking solely through the monetary lens, CHHS was spending twice the budget on discipline than were other schools. If we took the same budget and converted the disciplinary positions to CFCs, we could afford two world language teachers and four CFCs. We would gain not lose. To me this was a no-brainer and in the best interest of the students. Although this change would not take place until the following year, I thought long and hard about when I should notify the current teacher disciplinarians.

In the past, when I had been a teacher, I used to hear the teachers complain about the way in which the district waited until the very last minute to inform them of changes. Thus, out of respect I felt compelled to inform these teachers at this point in order to allow them a full year to devise a plan. This way I could support them in getting a position they might like. I knew that a couple of them were interested in becoming administrators, so a year would give us time to align them for such positions via special programs within and outside the district. I conferred with the ASHS. He merely asked me why I wanted to tell them, but was never advised not to share the decision. In an effort to be most respectful, I decided to tell the four disciplinarians. While none of them were happy, one in particular was definitely not going to let it go. I had no idea how it was going to play out. So I simply proceeded.

The preliminary data showed that once again CHHS had not met the requirements of the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals and that there had been minimal growth in
terms of state exams. Part of the reason why we did not meet the AYP was the number of seniors. There were over four hundred of them, a number unprecedented for a high school this size in the city. Of the four hundred, one hundred and twenty-five were repeaters and sixty-five only had enough credits to be in ninth or tenth grade. This was one of the reasons why the graduation rate was so low. I immediately started working with the registrar, guidance team, and administration to make sure that every student had the appropriate course schedule before the first day of school. This meant having difficult conversations with parents and with students who had been promoted to twelfth grade regardless of whether they had met course requirements. To assist these students, I created an in-school credit recovery program that was aligned with the district’s program. This allowed students to make up missing courses and graduate within a year or at most, by the next year, unless, of course, the student fell more credits short, in which case it would take longer. Students who still had three or more years of requirements left were counseled to attend alternative programs.

At the time this was happening, I had no say in filling two maternity leave positions. The district filled one position with an excessed permanent teacher who needed to be placed, and filled the other position with a graduate from the district’s internal teacher-training program. These two appointments were not necessarily the best fit for the students’ needs, but they met district demands. I did have input in the hiring of two other vacant positions. While getting the school up and running as smoothly as possible, I was busy acquainting myself with other key stakeholders in the community. I attended lunch meetings with the chancellor of the local college that was partnered with Castle Hill High; CHHS was a major training ground for the college’s education program.
as well as many of their community projects. There were meetings with local politicians and neighboring organizations. There were negotiations with other organizations that wished to come in to run their programs at the school in their own way. There was a lot going on, but the school year still began more smoothly than it had in years, as teachers admitted to me.

There were changes and some disagreements on issues such as how students were supposed to enter the building, whether they could be kicked out of class/school, and how in general they should be treated. Teachers were accustomed to kicking students out of class for any unwanted behavior instead of coming up with strategies for improving classroom management. And that was only if the more challenging students were allowed into the school. The disciplinarians made a practice of conveying the message with merely a look that made certain students know that they were not welcome and turn away at the door. This kind of behavior by the adults in the school was unacceptable, especially under my leadership. But since they knew they were not going to have these positions next year, the teacher disciplinarians did not care. They continued to kick students out even when told not to do so by the district operational leader. The disciplinarians went so far as to tell the students to call the superintendent and tell her that I was the one not letting them in the school. They wanted to abide by the teacher contract since that was officially their position, and so they wanted extra pay to conduct the duties of disciplinarians before and after school. In the past they had done this without additional pay, but in retaliation for my decision, they began making things difficult. As we needed these services, I met with them and came up with a compromise, which included some additional pay. But the budget was an issue.
For a second year in a row, the school was hit by a major cut from the district as well as the loss of grant funding. The small learning communities’ initiative funded by the Gates Foundation had ended. This meant no more stipends for teachers and administrators for doing their regular jobs. Such an adjustment would lead to problems. There were also disagreements between administrators, teachers, and myself about paying external student-support organizations. Much of the work that the CFCs did at other schools was being outsourced here at CHHS at the cost of eighty-six thousand dollars, which only left one hundred and ten thousand dollars in discretionary funds for the entire school year. This clearly would not be enough for a school that spent over thirty thousand dollars on copy paper and over twelve thousand dollars on toner the previous year. In an effort to get a handle on why so much money had been spent on copy paper and toner, especially after I saw a classroom with every inch of the students’ desks covered with worksheets, I put a fifteen hundred limit of copies per teacher per term until we found a better solution. This put the teachers in an uproar. They felt that they could not teach without making more copies. When I asked one teacher what they were making copies of, she replied reading books. I suggested that it would be more cost-effective to buy the students a set of reading books and only make copies of pages when teachers wanted students to mark up the text. She was surprised at the option, that we could actually buy the students reading books.

Not keeping everything the same clearly aroused the anxiety level of the administration and raised the discomfort level of those who were definitely used to getting their way. Yet even under these circumstances, the teachers were still pleased with the start of school and even more pleased with the quiet hallways and the students’
compliance with school rules. My presence in the halls, classrooms, and lunchroom made a noticeable difference. The parents also noted their easy accessibility to me, which was new to their experience at Castle Hill High School.

This was only the beginning, and right at the start. By October, I had to put together an interview committee and hire a new Director of Bilingual Education, all the while pulling together the School Site Council and the Parent Council. As can be expected with any leadership position, the multi-tasking did not end there. I was also preparing and catching up with work begun for accreditation only to find out later that the process had been postponed for another year. My focus then turned to defining the details of the professional development agenda. I connected back with the organization that had supported our teacher action research at Global Business Academy. Although the vision was mine, the inquiry practice was implemented through a collaboration of the outside facilitator, the school’s Instructional Leadership Team, teacher leaders, and administrative representatives. Teacher Leaders were identified before the start of school based on teacher applications, as was the custom at CHHS.

So far things seemed to be moving right along, and mind you, not without some disagreements or minor problems here and there, but nothing major that might have led anyone to believe what would happen next. In mid-October, I found out by chance during a phone call on another matter with the Academic Superintendent of High Schools about a package that had been sent to the Superintendent from the teachers of Castle Hill High. The package contained anonymous letters complaining about me. Apparently, on the first day of school before the students’ arrival, the teachers had met with their union president to find out how they could replace me. Since I had not violated the contract,
there were no grounds for replacement. The teachers had simply been told to document everything I said and did. This I later learned was the backlash organized by one of the teacher disciplinarians, a former union representative. He was going to do everything necessary to keep his position.

At the end of October, the faculty, staff, and administrators had a meeting with the Superintendent. I was not allowed to nor did the teachers want to speak to me about the letters or any concerns they had. The Superintendent listened to the CHHS faculty and staff reassuring them of her confidence in me. Since they could not get me replaced, they insisted on me having a coach but were not pleased with the coach to whom I was assigned. The coach was a former CHHS headmaster who was not liked by one of the assistant headmasters. This assistant headmaster has been at this high school for thirty-five years and was used to running much of the school. I met weekly with her, seeking her counsel and support. As the Deputy Superintendent, whom I got to know, stated, none of this would have happened had I not been female, Korean, and young-looking. This also made sense when I learned that one of my black male colleagues, who was going through similar issues with the faculty at his high school, had the full support of the superintendent. He actually met with the superintendent regularly.

It was only at that point, about two weeks after, late on a Friday, that I was given a verbal summary in a meeting with my supervisors and coach on some of the themes in the letters written by the teachers. It is always humbling sitting and listening to others telling you what you are doing wrong. I sat open minded, trying not to take it personally. I simply did not understand why the teachers had not had the courage to tell me themselves. Anyway, a plan was drafted as to how I was to proceed with the coach. I
kept about the business at hand at CHHS, always directing my focus on what was in the best interest of the students, teaching, and learning.

At the end of the day, the small number of teachers and administrators leading this charge against me were not satisfied because they did not get their way exactly. According to the words of the Academic Superintendent of High Schools, “They are not going to give up until either you break and quit, or we remove you.” Three of the four CHHS administrators had a special meeting with the superintendent to discuss their concerns about me. Interestingly, the one administrator who did not think the same and supported me was not included in the meeting. Up until then, no one had actually met with me. The union representatives and the teacher representatives on the School Site Council finally agreed to meet with me. And once again I sat listening humbly to all the teachers’ concerns and issues, one of which was that I was not approachable. I never did understand that one since I had an open-door policy, and the same people complaining were often in my office meeting with me about other matters (especially as all the while, they knew what they were doing behind my back.) One of the teachers spoke up, noting that I was there listening to them now. I was not being defensive or trying to rebut any comments, but genuinely listening. It did not matter. Teachers were using students to file false complaints against me. The basketball coach asked his student manager why she had filed a false complaint against me especially since I had done so much to support her. She said that she had to since she wanted the teacher to write her a college recommendation letter. When I tried to explain to my supervisor that this type of behavior was taking place, instead of confronting the teachers, he decided to remove me because the letters and petitions did not stop coming. Some teachers came apologizing to
me for signing the petition. According to their words, they had felt bullied into signing and had been threatened that if they did not sign, the union would not be there to support them should they ever need it.

The Academic Superintendent of High Schools and the assistant ASHS came to a regularly scheduled evaluation meeting and informed me that this would not be a regular one. Instead, as of December twenty-third, I would no longer be the headmaster of Castle Hill High School. I was not to return after vacation. This happened on December eighteenth, on the academic superintendent’s third visit to the school since September. 

How he came up with this decision was baffling. He never discussed any concerns with me or listen to my perspective of what was happening.

Hearing the news, I shared my thoughts and opinions in the most professional manner I could under the circumstances. No explanation or any reasons were given for the decision, merely the decision and directions on how I could assist with informing the rest of the CHHS community. I let them know how inappropriate it was for them to come in the middle of a school day and drop such a bombshell. I had arrived on the assumption that for once they were coming to listen to the work we were doing at the school and to look at the evidence. I had not expected them to come and disrespect me by revealing that he (the ASHS) had to find a headmaster that would be willing to take me as an assistant headmaster. I literally bit the inside of my cheek to hold back from snapping at him. Who did he think he was? He could not control my fate or my career. Only I could. But I did share with him and the assistant ASHS that I understood why our students and families felt as disregarded as they did. If they treated the students and families as they had treated me, I understood. But I did not understand how my former
supervisor, the assistant ASHS, who should have known that I did not say or do the things I had been accused of, stood by throughout this whole time and said nothing in my defense. I guess things change when we have to protect our own jobs but that would never be true of me.

No one was supposed to know of this decision. They did not yet have a replacement for me, or so they said. And yet that same night, at the union holiday party, the matter was the talk of the party. I was exchanging places with the Director/Principal of Tech Academy at City Technical Vocational High School (CTVHS). And as you know, that is exactly what happened. Everyone had known but me.

I had to make an announcement about the letter that was being sent out by the superintendent to notify the faculty, staff, and families of the change in leadership. Then I held a meeting with the faculty to introduce the new headmaster, asking them to give him the opportunity that they had not given me. Then I left for school vacation. When I did not hear anything though vacation to end the next day, I called and learned about the exchange. I was to report to CTVHS as the Director/Principal of Tech Academy.

My secretary commented on how strong I was, able as I had been to come to work for all those months, holding my head up with a smile on my face. Although I was devastated at how mean people could be, especially to someone who had only been trying to do what was in the best interest of our students and them, I had my integrity, honor, and morals to uphold. No matter what happened, I would not compromise any of what was most important to my core and the essence of my being. I ignored the fact that teachers had been heard singing and dancing when they found out that they had succeeded in getting rid of me. I did not judge them for passing cruel judgments on me.
I did not seek revenge for I believed that everyone would eventually face the consequences of his/her choices, including myself. But I became more convinced than ever that the public school system was not about our children. I began questioning whether I wanted to stay in a profession that was so hypocritical.
Another Chance

As I was looking for new job postings, as I often did, I saw one with the perfect job description. It was for a headmaster position at a turnaround high school. This was the type of challenge that I love. I read through the entire job description, then saw the name of the superintendent. It was familiar and something about it made me hesitate. I knew that she used to work in my district but I could not put my finger on exactly why it caused me concern. But I had a feeling in my gut, the kind to which we usually ought to listen. So with this in mind as well as my concern about the time commitment demanded by such a position—given that I was still taking care of my adopted mother in another state—I let it drop. I did not see the posting again until about a month or so later. It was three in the morning and I was looking for jobs—again. And here it had reappeared, a description of the type of work I love doing. This time, I applied.

A few weeks prior, I had traveled to another state to interview for another position that would have allowed me to do the type of work I love. Throughout the process, it was decided that another job was more fitting for me given the political circumstances. But right as I was being offered the position and my salary requests were being met, I received a phone call in response to my late-night job application. A phone conversation with the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) was the start of an interview; a formal interview was set up for a few days later. There was a snowstorm on the day of the interview, and the drive was an hour long on a good day. This felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so I would not let a snowstorm get in the way. Perhaps, however, it was a sign of things to come.
The interview was different from what I had experienced during previous headmaster interviews. These usually included a large committee representing all the stakeholders, a school visit, and conversations with other groups of stakeholders. But this interview was only with the superintendent and the CAO. The superintendent shared with me the state of the district and the high school. She proceeded to ask me questions about items on my resume. I was very honest when strategically explaining my short tenure at my prior headmastership and the lessons I had learned in the process. I was open about describing the backlash I had received in my current position for doing my job of holding people accountable. I shared the type of work I had done and under what circumstances I had been most successful, that I did my best work when I was not being micro-managed. I explained that I simply needed to know what had to be done and that I would make sure it got done with the highest quality possible. This was the first time of many that I heard the superintendent state that she did not want to run the high school. The interview ended with me receiving a copy of a three-year turnaround plan to read while they took several days for a reference check. This was on a Tuesday. On Thursday I was back for a follow-up interview, this time only with the superintendent.

Within a few days, I had read the turnaround plan and it was clear to me that the school needed work. The data showed a lack of effective systems for supporting successful teaching practices or an equitable environment. The new organizational chart of the leadership team had a structure that clearly outlined those who would be in charge of specific roles in the school. According to the chart, the headmaster’s role (according to my interpretation) was to create a shared vision with the school team. Above and beyond providing guidance and steering the leadership team in communication and work
alignment, the headmaster was the one who was to communicate with the community and bring resources to the school. This, of course, is in the simplest sense the role of the headmaster. The headmaster would have to do a great deal of hiring, which included hiring the rest of the leadership team except the two principals who had already been hired by the superintendent. In terms of the leadership team, there were specific positions for the specific roles required to run the school. There was the Chief of Teaching and Learning Advancement (CTLA), a Chief Operating Officer (COO), and two principals—one for the upper school and one for the lower school. There were three assistant principals and five content instructional leaders (CIL), including ones for the special education department and the English language learners department. There was also a Registration and Alternative Pathways Administrator and a Technology Manager. As the superintendent pointed out, the size of the school made it comparable to a small school district of its own. There was no reason for me to think that the job could not be done.

The superintendent made her calls to check on me. As a former employee of my current district, she personally knew my references and more. I too made a couple of calls and received no warnings or reasons for concern. One of my former supervisors thought we would work well together. So when I was offered the position and given a contract to sign, I signed it right then and there, before leaving. I remember stepping into the restroom before departing on the hour-long commute back home, and thanking God for this opportunity of a lifetime.

That was at the end of February. The formal announcement of my appointment could not be made until the School Committee gave its approval, which was to take place at the next meeting at the beginning of March. I was to start my appointment on April 1st.
on a consultant basis, and start my contract officially on July 1st. This posed a challenge because the current leadership team was still running the high school and I did not want to be disrespectful. I was directed by the superintendent to work at the high school, to acquaint myself with the school and do the work necessary to start implementing the turnaround plan. I did request that I not be at the high school, but I had no choice in the matter. I met with the current headmaster to show my understanding of his circumstances as well as to share my circumstances. I let him know that I was there to support his efforts to complete the school year successfully and that I would stay in the background doing what I needed to do to implement the turnaround plan. I made it clear that I understood he was still the headmaster. He was kind and understanding. This was the start of a mutually respectful relationship. After getting to know him, I actually looked into hiring him as the COO. The superintendent would not consider him, however, since he had already resigned. While it went against conventional advice to hire a former headmaster, it made sense to hire someone who knew the building and key players. I considered it only because of the sort of person this headmaster was, and the working relationship that we were developing.

The implementation of the turnaround plan had actually begun earlier in the year, after the superintendent and the school committee decided to avoid state takeover by trying to improve the high school via a turnaround model. As expected, the school community was very concerned upon hearing that everyone would have to reapply for their jobs and that at least 50% of them would not be returning. This created a divided faculty and a culture of distrust and animosity. Once teachers learned that they were not returning, many chose to use their sick days so that on any given day, there would be
over thirty teachers absent. The students were ultimately the ones who suffered the effects, once again, and only a limited amount of teaching and learning was going on. At the same time, I walked the hallways and peeked into cafeterias during breakfast and lunch and classrooms during class time, students were generally orderly. This is noteworthy because discipline had been one of the main concerns of the teachers and the community at large. While there were discipline issues, they were not anywhere near the types of discipline issues that I had had to deal with in previous schools half the size.

There were advantages to starting in April as opposed to July. I had an opportunity to join the work of the School Redesign Team, which had done as much as it could by this point and was eager to have me join and bring a vision that it was missing. But it also came with challenges. I could sense the hurt and defeat that the school community was feeling. The headmaster was doing his best to keep the school running and send off another class of graduates. We both treaded lightly in order not to make it more difficult for each other. But this was not the only challenge. I was hired at the same time as were the two principals, and I was not involved in the process. These two men were not officially starting until July and only came to specific events or meetings at which their presence was necessary. They had to finish their prior commitments, and I tried to be mindful of this responsibility. We did our best to meet weekly so that they too could start getting to know the school and be involved in the work that I was doing, but this was minimal. This beginning was different from what I had experienced before, but I still put together an entry plan following Barry Jentz’s template. I did not get to implement it in an ideal way, but doing what I was directed to do, I found ways to implement the various components of the plan. Most importantly, I tried to meet with
students, teachers, families, community organizations, and members to listen to their concerns, hopes, and ideas.

Before the teachers left for the summer, I gave them an opportunity to meet with me. For over two days I sat from 7:30am to 3:30pm meeting with teachers about every 15-20 minutes. I listened to what they hoped to teach the next year and anything else that they wanted to share with me. I asked them why they wanted to be at the school. Most were flexible, some had specific requests, and all were happy to be returning. As I listened to the various constituents of the school and community, I noted the prevalence of people’s pride in the high school. Many of them were lifetime residents and had attended the high school themselves. They had memories of a time when the school had been one of the best in the state, especially in sports. The general sense was that of a community living in its glory days and not noticing or acknowledging the changes that had come and were taking place in their community and school. Then one day they had been awakened from their nostalgic existence to the realities that time had slipped away, and shocked at the current state of their beloved high school. But to the community’s credit, everyone was committed to being part of the solution and coming together to turn the high school around and back to being the successful pillar of the community that it once had been. This aligned with my belief that the job could not be done without the acquiescence and collaboration of the whole community. The message that I shared was that it would take all of us to improve the school and that we had to do so for the sake of our children and the future of their community.

Listening to what the community and school was looking to build, I put together a proposed program of studies that would meet the desires of the students as identified
through a student survey, strengthen the already existent successful programming, and meet the needs of the community’s employers. This actually meant connecting the school to a previous organization I had previously worked with when founding Global Business Academy. This organization’s career academies were in total alignment with Seaside High School (SHS)’s situation and where the school was trying to go. Ironically, SHS had already implemented one academy and had been unsuccessful in growing other academies in prior years, much to its dismay. So, when I proposed a full implementation program with the addition of three more academies and one homegrown academy based on the strong arts program at Seaside High School, everyone was invigorated and started seeing hope in the turnaround process. This was an easy sell. I started by sharing with the School Redesign Team and getting their input. After some tweaking, I started sharing with the rest of the faculty, students, their families, then the various community groups, especially business leaders. This also helped my acceptance by the community as I was preparing to relocate.

Resistance arose when I had to reveal that part of the turnaround plan that decreased the five to seven levels of instruction down to two. The high school had a culture of individualizing instruction by grouping students according to their performance level. This ranged from the most severe special education students, who received substantially separate classes in very basic skills, both academic and occupational, to the highest performing students, who had access to advanced placement (AP) and college courses. Most students who were placed in lower level courses and ended up not receiving the full curricula were students of color and of lower socio-economic status. This left the white students and those of the upper socio-economic class with a complete
curricula that prepared them for college without the distraction of lower performing students in their classes. The thought of losing this set-up was very threatening to both students and their parents. My concern expressed itself when I advocated for the students whom adults referred to as animals and degenerates. This did pose a number of challenges.

The teachers were also not used to teaching multi-level classes. They too were concerned about how they were going to make this adjustment. Students who shared their parent’s views were likewise concerned about being in classes with students who differed from them. These concerns naturally raised concerns among school committee members, including the mayor. Since the superintendent was a key author of both the turnaround plan and the decision to have two levels of instruction, reconsidering was not an option. Although I too had issues with the inequitable access to curriculum, I would not have imposed a firm number on the levels of instruction, but would have called for more equitable programming. This would have left some flexibility for creating options that would best meet students’ needs as opposed to trying to trim their needs down to two choices. I thus reread the language of the turnaround plan and came up with a compromise that did not undermine the superintendent’s plan but did meet some of the concerns of the students and parents. The two levels consisted of a general level and an AP level, but the number of AP courses in specific content areas was limited. This allowed me to create honors-level courses in cases where there were no AP courses, while ensuring that technically speaking there were only two levels of instruction. To avoid going back to multiple levels, we added the honors levels only in the core content areas of ELA, math, science, and social studies. This appeased some, but not all.
Those families whose demands were not met by this compromise chose to send their students to another school. This did not help alleviate the other concern that the turnaround plan was meant to address. The high school’s enrollment was decreasing as it was losing students to local private and charter schools. As the neighboring town did not have a high school, its residents had always attended SHS. Recently, however, they had started choosing to go to other neighboring high schools. Initially the parents had been choosing other schools because of discipline problems, now due to the lack of levels. The silent way to attribute the reason for leaving SHS to the changing demographic and socioeconomic level of the community was to lay the blame for the discipline problem on SHS. This was exasperated by an isolated incident that did take place that school year when a student ended up throwing a chair at a teacher. But as the real reason for not sending a student to a high school was race and class, no compromise in levels of instruction was going to bring him/ her to SHS. The problem required a different community relations approach, so we focused on what SHS did have to offer that options at the other high school did not. Due to the size of the school (two thousand and one hundred plus students), we were able to offer fifteen AP courses with plans to add more, had a robust arts and humanities program, and a focus on a career academy, to name just a few. Not only did I have to make this pitch to students and families, but I also had to address the school committee and the mayor. During a school committee meeting, I was grilled for over an hour on the feasibility of two levels of instruction as well as on the improvement plan for the school’s climate and culture and how it was going to attract students back to Seaside High School.
As expected, this was only one of many issues being addressed. The leadership team was still lacking members, more staffing cuts needed to be made, and all the teachers that had been let go had to be replaced. A committee was formed to complete the hiring of the CTLA, the COO, the three assistant principals, and the five CILs. This was far more difficult than expected. Although we had a number of applicants, we did not receive many qualified candidates. We ended up hiring the math, and humanities/literacy CILs, and two assistant principals who were current administrators. I was concerned about the current housemaster being hired as an assistant principal because of her demeaning approach. When I voiced this to the superintendent, she snapped back by saying that I had to get over it and bring back some of the administrators in order to have a mix of old and new. (Later, after an assembly, I was blamed for the assistant principal’s demeaning attitude towards students.) At the time, I remember thinking that I really had no choice in who was going to be on my leadership team. We had difficulty finding a third qualified assistant principal and ended up hiring a biology teacher whom we had slotted for the science content instructional leader position. Consequently, we were never able to fill the science CIL position. I was advised not to hire the other internal science teacher for the position due to political ramifications. She was the former head of the science department and did not have a good reputation with the science team. Her husband also worked at the central level and there were issues with how he had managed finances. Although I had no factual evidence, it was pretty much determined by the central administration that I was not to hire her. The same went for a social studies teacher applying for the humanities/literacy CIL position. Political issues
prevented me from hiring him too. But I did find a way to gain his support in other roles that granted opportunities for students.

Since we were unable to find a qualified COO, we recommended an assistant principal applicant for the position. His resume and interview deemed him capable for the job, and the hiring committee all agreed to hire him. We later discovered that this had been a bad decision. The school building was big and the job enormous, too much for this man to handle. As I began realizing this, I reached out to him with my concerns and let him know that it was okay for him to tell me what he could not handle. I informed him that the superintendent and the CAO also had their concerns. I told him that I was there to support him and that I wanted him to be successful. Evidently he was intimidated by me as well as by the job.

I had a former colleague in mind for the chief of teaching learning position. We had worked at a previous school on teacher inquiry and action research, a revised and improved version of the work we had done at Global Business Academy. I knew that if we were going to improve student performance, we had to start with the teachers. We would have to teach them how to analyze their student data in order to improve their instruction. This was how I wanted to change the culture of the school, to turn it into one that served students. I also felt confident that I would not have to worry about the teaching and learning component of the turnaround plan if my colleague was in the lead. We would be on the same page. He went ahead and interviewed with the committee and was recommended for hire. Before the final interview with the superintendent, however, he withdrew his candidacy due to the time commitment of the job, which included the commute. He was a new father and wanted to make sure he was available to his family.
I reached out to him and discussed how he could do both and asked if he would reconsider. He did and proceeded with his interview with the superintendent. During salary negotiations, he ended up withdrawing again. I was concerned that the superintendent’s style had clashed with my colleague’s style for they were quite different. Once he explained to me why he had withdrawn, I understood. But for the first time, I began to worry about how we would be able to turn the school around academically. This position was vital to the process; if I had to take it on as well as the headmastership, my job was going to be far more difficult than expected.

As the search for the CTLA and the special education and science CILs dragged on, I continued to fill the teaching positions. I was holding interviews whenever there were new applicants—day, evening, and weekends. The two principals joined me whenever they were available. This task grew more challenging as the positions remaining were the most difficult ones for any school to fill— instructors in science, math, special education, English language learning, and engineering. Whenever I was able to find a teacher, the district could not or would not pay the salary that the candidate demanded. The school year began with fourteen vacancies despite the hire of ten Teach for America graduates and interviews with candidates from in and out of state. This did not bode well for any of us, especially our students. Anything that got in the way of our students receiving the best they deserved, perturbed me. When asked what were my concerns about the job, I replied that my greatest concern was the fact that not all students had a regular qualified teacher in their classrooms. On top of that, most of these were students who had risked their lives to get an education here and I could not provide them with a qualified teacher. This bothered me and kept me up at night.
We were able to fill the special education content instructional leader position and in late summer we were able to fill the CTLA position. She was well experienced and knowledgeable, and though she was not the colleague that I had originally had in mind, I was confident that she too could do the job. She shared values, which were in tune with my own, and shared her loyalty to me. She and the math and humanities and literacy CILs became my strongest supporters as I prepared for the opening of school. Then again, all this was happening as I was addressing another issue in the turnaround plan.

Too many students had been retained in grade nine and the graduation rate, while improving slightly, was still too low. Thus, when analyzing the data, I realized that students who failed could not make up courses during summer school unless they could afford to attend them. Students had to pay tuition in order to attend summer school. This did not make sense since the district knew that the students could not afford to pay. The district qualified for universal free breakfast and lunch due to the high percentage of low-income students. So in an effort to allow more students to qualify for their diplomas by the end of August and to decrease the number of students retained, I submitted a proposal to hold a free summer school program and an August graduation ceremony for the seniors who needed the extra time. The community, including the school committee, did not believe that students would attend. The superintendent and the CAO wondered how we could afford to do this when in previous years, the tuition had helped pay for the summer teachers. In collaboration with the district’s grant people, I reallocated available grant dollars to create a summer program that would meet the grant requirements as well as allow students to make up their failed courses. This also included a summer acceleration program for the incoming 9th graders, which was required by the turnaround plan. The
two principals proceeded to develop the details of their respective summer programs. We were well on our way by July first.

Between April and end of June, the two principals and I seemed to get along just fine. On the occasions we had to present together at meetings, especially to parents and the community, we seemed to click. Without rehearsing or much coordination we would finish each other’s thoughts and make cohesive presentations. But it was not long before differences crept in. One of the first differences when we started working together regularly lay in our work ethic. Whereas I was working seven days a week from morning until night, the two principals came to work Monday through Friday, ran their summer programs, then left right after our afternoon debriefings, at around two o’clock. I did not understand this, considering all the work that needed to be done. I tried to be mindful and respectful of their positions as principals and expected that they were doing everything necessary to prepare for the opening of school. I also did not think that I had to direct them in everything that they needed to do; I simply assumed that they would take the initiative and know what needed to be done. After all, they had been principals before. But this was not necessarily the case. We did talk about the awkwardness of them being principals but not in charge of the entire school. It was also awkward being a headmaster with two principals who were entitled to autonomy as such, but needed so much direction. This I did not discuss with them, of course. Instead we shared with each other what we were working on and the timeline in which things needed to be done.

The differences really came to the fore when we started preparing student schedules. The hope was for this to be done before the students left for the summer. However, given the inadequate implementation of the current student information system
and the impossibility of implementing the new one until much later, this did not happen to the point that I had hoped. Needless to say, and partly due to my fault (I should have involved more people regardless of the added workload), we were still working on inputting student schedules in August. While the CILs—two of which struggled to modify their department schedules to changing enrollments—and all the clerical support along with the other administrators were working long hours to get the information into the program, the two principals spent very little time at work. They took hour-long lunches while we were all working. Although the lower school principal said that he was working on parts of the schedule, the rest of the team would later discover that the task had not been done or done incorrectly. After one long lunch break, I called the leadership team minus the CILs to a meeting to discuss how inappropriate it was for the two principals to be doing what they were doing. I shared that this was not the type of culture that I was trying to create or the message that we wanted to send to the rest of the school. The two principals were not used to this kind of school environment, in which everyone did work, including the leadership team. Instead, they made it clear that this type of work was beneath them. Several strong points came out about the two principals, as noted by the rest of the team. Neither of the two principals had any urban experience nor any experience with a school this size. The lower school principal lacked high school experience. The team was not wrong in its assessment. This added to my work. I had to manage the leadership team as well as carefully instruct the two principals and the COO in what they were supposed to do and sometimes, how to do their jobs. Most importantly, I had to let them know that it was okay to share with me what they were not confident in doing. This was the only way we would be able to cover for each other. I let
them know that we would only be complete and effective if we worked as a team. It was important for us to have each other’s backs.

This message was not well received. One Sunday morning I received a request from the superintendent to meet with her that day. So, at four-thirty in the afternoon I was sitting across from the superintendent as she informed me that one of the principals had approached her with concerns about me. She told me that the principals felt that I was unapproachable and that I would not listen to them. She was also appalled that I had asked one of the principals to return to work rather than attend to his sick son. This was troubling for me to hear because that is not what had happened. Even more upsetting was the fact that he had not brought this up at one of our daily meetings, during which I always asked if there were any issues or concerns that needed to be addressed. This was also not the way I did things. If there is a problem, I address it with the person. I do not go running to the head supervisor and complain. I tried to express my concerns about the principals and how I was trying to address them, but the superintendent did not really have any interest in listening to what I had to say. Instead, she informed me that I was to give the principals the autonomy of being such. I was to hold individual meetings with the two principals and the COO, and that I was not to speak. I was to listen to what they had to say and what they wanted from me. I was to listen and do what they asked. I was also to meet daily with them alone and not with the rest of the leadership team. I knew at that moment that I had more serious issues than implementing the turnaround plan. My authority and autonomy had just been stripped, if I had ever even had them.

Upon returning to work the next day, I scheduled individual meetings and listened to each principal to see how they felt and what they wanted. They both wanted
individual meetings. One of the principals felt disrespected because I had not been considerate of his family issues. This was the same principal whom I had told to go home early because of family issues; the same principal whom I had told to stay home because of family matters. But I listened and apologized if he felt I disrespected him. As a result of the individual meetings and the directives of the superintendent, we scheduled daily six-thirty in the morning meetings to start our day because there was no other time after school or during the day. We scheduled time for individual meetings for the lower principal because that was what he wanted. We scheduled meetings with the entire leadership team twice a week. I tried to be gentler and less intimidating with the COO, as he had requested. In the meantime, I could not address the concerns I had about the group’s inefficiencies. Although I tried to share my concerns with the CAO and the superintendent, they fell on deaf ears. They simply wanted to know how I was going to get the leadership team to work together better.

While all this was happening, the summer program ended successfully with a couple of hundred students meeting requirements for promotion and another twenty-plus seniors meeting graduation requirements. Everyone but me was surprised at how many students attended. Students and parents were thanking me for the opportunity. This also gave us a chance to set the tone of expectations for the school year to come. The students realized that things were going to get stricter and that there was going to be more follow through. The summer for the students ended with a nice graduation ceremony. But this was not enough. The community and more importantly, the state wanted to know what was going to be different—how the students and their families would know that this was going to be a different school.
I thus proposed painting the inside of the school and redoing the landscaping in front of the school. This would definitely create a physical change in the new school. Initially, I wanted to repaint the entire interior of the main building, but I knew that would be a bit too much. I reached out to the district’s Business Manager and Facilities Director for their support. We strategized about how we would approach the school committee for permission, and the community for a donation of materials and volunteers. We were granted permission, and both the Business Manager and the Facilities Director were impressed with how I got the deal done. Within one long weekend—three days—we got the core of the first floor painted. The colors were selected according to the research conducted by one of the city’s liaisons, while the accent paint colors were selected by one of the custodians. We also redid all the landscaping in front of the school. Students, teachers, families, and various community members donated all the labor and local businesses donated all the required materials. Dominos donated pizza and soda to feed the volunteers. This was symbolic of the community’s commitment to the success of the high school. It was impressive and rewarding. We held one more major event before the students arrived.

In addition to the coach the turnaround plan required for the headmaster (which I had not received yet) and the two retreats for the leadership team, which had not occurred yet, the plan called for twenty additional hours of professional development (PD) for teachers in August. To maximize the hours and the training I wanted to schedule, I asked the CAO for the one district day of required PD, which gave us twenty-six hours. On the first two days we focused on climate and culture since this was the greatest concern on teachers’ minds. The school community came together to identify the values and beliefs
of and the expectations for the school. Then the teachers focused on learning different strategies for creating engaging classrooms and redirecting students so as to prevent discipline issues. The administrators had their own PD the day before, to prepare for the entire school’s PD. The principals and assistant principals presented the protocol for follow up, should teachers need additional support. The teachers truly appreciated the PD and shared that it was the first time they could remember having a constructive PD in which they had felt valued and treated like professionals. They also felt they had learned strategies that they could actually implement in their classrooms. They did not feel as though it had been a waste of time as they had in the past. The remaining hours were spent on creating quality lessons for student mastery and developing lessons for multilevel learners. This portion of the PD was just the start of a much greater task that would take place during weekly common planning periods. The schedule required by the turnaround plan allowed for content area teachers to meet three times a week. These meetings were to be led by the CILs. Since we still did not have a science CIL and the social studies department was too big to add to the ELA department, the upper school principal picked up the social studies department while the CTLA picked up the science department. At least this was the plan. It never really happened. The principal felt that it was not his job and the CTLA was too busy doing other things as directed by the CAO.

The school year started with some scheduling issues, most of which were resolved within a week. The halls were clear as students were inside their classes in spite of all the vacancies. Lunches were overcrowded and needed some readjusting. But most importantly, the teaching was very weak. This was the first time that we were truly getting a handle on the level of instruction. The previous year, it had been the CAO and
the superintendent who had reviewed all the reapplications of the teachers, and the ones who decided who would return and who would not. Those returning included seven teachers who were supposed to have been let go but due to inaccurate implementation of evaluation protocols according to the union contract, were allowed to return. A couple of weeks after school started, the superintendent and the CAO took their first learning walk.

These two always came speeding into the school and walked briskly through the halls critiquing every sight and sound that they did not like. They would call teachers out in front of the students. They would question any and everyone with whatever concern they had. I am not one for putting on a dog-and-pony show. When they arrived for the learning walk, they told us how they wanted the administrators split up to conduct the walk. Each group was to visit about five to six randomly selected classrooms, then reconvene in my office. When we did so, the superintendent banged her fist on the table, swearing and yelling after hearing what the groups had seen and heard. She could not believe the low quality of teaching and the lack of instruction. She demanded to know what we were going to do to fix the problem, which she wanted us to fix by the next day. She told us that she would come back in a week and wanted to see things improved. Then she and the CAO left. My team was astonished and in shock. We knew we had a lot of work to do but we had not expected to be yelled at, cursed at, and treated the way we had been. It took me a couple days to get the team recuperated from that type of treatment. But that was just the beginning.

I am not sure what the superintendent and the CAO were expecting. The school had been deemed a turnaround high school for a reason. It had taken many years to fall to that level. It could not be turned around overnight. Plus the emotional state of more
than half the teachers was very fragile; they still did not trust either the superintendent or us. The previous year had been traumatic for them, and all the changes expected of them the next year, overwhelming. From my perspective, I needed to address the emotional state of the teachers before I could get them to address teaching issues. And while I understood the urgency and the pressure on the superintendent to make the turnaround succeed, I too was under a great deal of pressure and had been given only a short time to demonstrate improvement. But my approach is not to bring people down and yell at them, demanding immediate change. I was trying to serve as a model for the rest of the school, to show what was expected of them. I worked hard and everyone could see that.

I respected our students and their teachers, and they all knew that. When I was evaluating teachers I showed them how to collaborate and offered support to help them grow. Intimidated teachers began letting down their guard and funneling energy into different strategies. I tried to set the same model for my administrators, but they had their own agendas. One principal took a punitive route, similar to the one adopted by the CAO and superintendent, while the other one told us that he was evaluating but we later learned that he had not always been doing what he had said he was doing. But this was not new, as the superintendent herself had learned this firsthand before school had even started.

As for the lower school principal, he was in charge of freshman orientation. I only checked in with him for status reports, suggestions, and ideas, as well as to provide support when he requested. I was trying very hard to follow the superintendent’s directives to grant him autonomy. When it came to notifying students and mailing out welcome letters, a small group of us stayed late to make sure that over one thousand and
five hundred letters were folded, put in envelopes, sealed, and delivered to the post office. The lower school principal, however, decided not to mail the incoming freshmen their welcome letters with the date and time of their orientation. This is just one example of the types of mistakes the principals made. As the headmaster, there was very little I could do to hold the principals accountable, thanks to the circumstances that had been created by the superintendent.

After the incident in August and the way it had been handled by the superintendent, any authority I had with the principals had pretty much vanished. On top of that, the superintendent had gone against the organizational structure in the turnaround plan and had the principals officially report to her and the CTLA report to the CAO. Both the superintendent and the CAO had pretty much written off the COO since he was not up to their standards—so much so, that several months into the school year, they decided that he would be let go. I asked whether I could provide him with more support and fully follow the evaluation protocol before letting him go. The central team would not agree, and the COO was basically given an alternative to resign or stay at the risk of undergoing a full investigation of his performance, which would result in termination. I understood the concern as I was regularly checking in on the COO since he was showing signs of an emotional meltdown. Other administrators reported to me that he was crying and asking them for help. The COO hired an attorney and came to an agreement with the district to stay until the end of December. I was instructed to give him a limited amount of work and only from the list provided to me by the Executive Director of Human Capital.
While all that was happening, the superintendent and CAO made their routine learning walks; now, instead of yelling at the whole team, the superintendent yelled only at me. Either she came to my office or I would be called to her office during the school day, after school, on Saturdays, or whatever time she felt was appropriate. It did not matter. And most of the time it was the same thing. Teaching and learning was horrific; what was I going to do in order to fix it by the next day. She yelled at me for working too hard but then gave me more work. After a couple of more times of this, the superintendent repeated what she had said at the beginning of the year: she did not want to run the high school.

On the first day of school, all the faculty and staff wore pants of their choice with red polo shirts that had our updated motto on them. This was another visible symbol of our unity as a faculty. The superintendent did not approve that I was wearing what everyone else was wearing and told me that I needed to dress more like a headmaster. On most days—other than Fridays, which was “school spirit day”—I wore suits, but I was now being told I had to do so every day. She also did not approve of the sneakers that I wore when I made my rounds around the school. She said I needed to wear heels all the time; being female, I had to make sure I had a presence in the school. Considering that I was one of maybe two Asian adults in the entire building, I had presence even without my outgoing personality. I could always be heard acknowledging everyone as I walked down the halls. My presence went beyond my clothing.

It did not stop there. The superintendent always found a way to add a jab here or there. I considered these jabs as threats. How else was I to take a statement from a boss who stated that she was the only person standing between my career and me? The yelling
simply got worse and more frequent. My secretaries and teachers heard her shouting at me. Her secretaries heard her shouting at me. The yelling turned into bullying and verbal abuse. My other administrators used to ask how I was putting up with it all. Although they were not getting yelled at as much as I was, they too were getting doses of it. Things escalated.

During my ninety-day review, the superintendent pointed out four areas that she wanted me to work on with communication and adaptive leadership being two of them. Although I had shared my concern about being yelled at all the time with the CAO, I finally decided to share it directly with the superintendent. The CAO did try to advocate on my behalf and in return received a reprimand. I told the superintendent that the way in which she was communicating was not helping. It was causing trauma rather than motivating me to do what she wanted me to do. Her reply was that this was my review, not hers, and that she did not yell. Still, I had let her know how her yelling affected me. Now she could either choose to stop or keep on yelling. She chose to continue yelling. I did tell her that I was concerned about not having any autonomy or authority to do what I felt needed to be done to get the results that she was looking for. She told me that that should not matter and that authoritative leadership was the weakest form of leadership.

I was also asked to be at the ninety-day reviews of the two principals, and I was amazed at the differences among all the reviews. The review with the lower school principal was the total opposite of my own. The superintendent covered a few of the dimensions in the evaluation tool, but other than that she was almost flirtatious. She laughed and spoke about the politics of the principal’s hometown. Her manner was nearly unrecognizable. Her presentation at the upper school principal’s review was not as
flirtatious but definitely not as harsh and business-like as it had been during my review. Not long after these reviews, things got even worse.

The first time and last time that we met with the union president was before school started. After the semester began, I heard about issues from the superintendent and the new Executive Director of Human Capital (EDHC). Most of these were operational concerns, which led to the decision to let the COO go. I had never worked at a school where I had no communication with the union. We did have monthly meetings with the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC), which consisted of four teachers who had been voted in by the faculty. The meeting consisted of sitting and listening to all the issues and possible solutions that teachers had written in a notebook or shared with FAC members. Then I would share what the administration was prepared to do about it. Afterwards, the minutes of this meeting were sent to the superintendent. The lower school principal was a representative on the district-wide committee that reviewed these minutes and concerns. It was something of a relief to hear that the issues at the high school were not nearly as numerous or as great as those raised at the other schools in the district. Hearing solely complaints made it seem as though I was doing a horrible job and my school was the worst. A different perspective was thus welcome.

I also did reach out to the union representatives at the school to let them know that while their past practice had been to communicate via FAC members and directly through the union president, I was very open and welcome to direct communication. They appreciated this and did inform me of an issue. The union bringing an issue to me was huge, so I wanted to make sure that I handled it as well as possible. Teacher paychecks/stubs were handed out each week by their assigned secretary or left in a file
for teachers to look through and pick up. There was an issue with the lack of privacy, which I brought up with human capital. The response I received from payroll was that it was not cost-effective to place them in envelopes. Since a teacher’s check had already been stolen and cashed, I knew I had to do something about the problem. Although it was more work for them, the secretaries had to put the checks in envelopes. The union representatives appreciated that I had listened and actually tried to resolve the issue. I felt that this was important in building a trusting and working relationship.

Within a short amount of time, a lot was getting done even if student performance was not improving to the degree expected by the superintendent. It was encouraging to hear from the Commissioner of Education after his visit that we were on the right track and should keep on going. He acknowledged that it had taken time to reach this status and that it would take time to emerge from it. He reminded the community at a school committee meeting that it is going to take years to improve the school. It was therefore very frustrating to hear the superintendent yell and demand immediate change overnight. I also learned that the superintendent and the commissioner were close acquaintances, if not friends. Normally this would not have mattered to me except for the fact that the superintendent had made it very clear that she stood between my career and me. So, everyone whom she knew in the education world mattered.

During one of the regularly called meetings, the CAO began questioning me on things that had been said at one of the leadership team meetings. I knew who had attended and reported this inaccurate information to the CAO. The turnaround plan called for a Turnaround Manager (TM) who was to support the work and make sure that we were meeting all the targets of the plan. The person hired was one of the faculty
members at the high school who was also serving as one of the co-chairs of the School Redesign Team. Instead of being a member of our team, she was reporting back to the superintendent. Sometimes it felt as though she was a tattletale and informant. This would not have been a problem save the fact that the information she delivered was inaccurate. So this time I did confront the CAO and asked why they had the TM acting in this capacity? Why did they not ask me what was going on directly? I saw this as another sign that they did not trust me.

The next time they called me to yell and demand overnight improvement in everything, I told them that if I were doing such a horrible job and they thought the school would fail because of me, I was ready to resign. I was not going to be the reason why the school was un成功的. In my mind, I did not want to be blamed for something in which I had no say. While I did have a say in the new program of studies, the master schedule, the soliciting of community support, to name a few things, there were many important things in which I did not. At one of the yelling fests, we were directed to script every word we were going to say at all our meetings and PDs with the faculty and staff. We were to submit these a week in advance for review and tweaking by the CAO. This involved our weekly after school PD meetings and the numerous common planning time meetings. We had to submit the topics for these after-school PDs for the rest of the school year, yet we were given the topics that the CAO wanted covered.

Then the two turned around and shouted to ask what I was spending all my time doing. To which I responded, “Trying to submit everything you are asking for and in the timeframe you set!” They then asked what everyone else was doing, and I said the same thing. Their solution was to state that the CAO and TM would be spending a lot more
time at the school, at least one day per week. So I had to find a spot for their workspace. The CAO came for one day, after which we did not see him again except during his usual check-in visits. I do not think that either the superintendent or the CAO realized the enormity of the work that needed to be done at the high school. Neither had ever run a high school. They simply know what they wanted accomplished but would not give in enough to let me run the high school. The superintendent kept on telling me that she did not want to run the high school but at the same time she would not let me run it. She also listened to everyone but me. During the CAO’s one-day visit, he spoke with the assistant principals. After hearing their complaints, the superintendent yelled at me for doing the very thing that she had commanded me to do because it had upset the assistant principals. At the beginning of the year the superintendent had asked me to meet solely with the principals. Because that had upset the assistant principals, I was now being questioned why I was doing that and told that I had to include them. At the same time, the assistant principals were saying that they would do anything while complaining that they were working beyond contractual hours. Our principals’ meetings were at six-thirty in the morning, before the assistant principal’s regular hours. Working on Saturdays for Saturday detention was fine, because the assistant principals were getting paid for it. But reaching this final decision was problematic.

I did not want the responsibility of Saturday detentions to be covered solely by the assistant principals. In a meeting, I asked that all members of the leadership team including the CILs sign up to cover two Saturdays in the entire year; that way no one person had to work many Saturdays. What I later learned was that the upper school principal, who lived over an hour away and was also having major family issues, did not
feel he had to cover any Saturdays. He therefore went to each administrator and told him/her to ignore my request and go against me. It was around this time that I also learned that the two principals were talking about becoming co-headmasters if they could get me out. These two had originally applied for the headmaster position but ended up with the principal positions. They were purposely trying to sabotage me.

These were the same two people who I had been trying to support and have their backs in order to build teamwork and prove to the superintendent that I could pull the team together. I thought that things had improved after the first time the superintendent had yelled at us and I had reached out to the two principals. Afterwards I had gone to them and let them know that this would not work unless we did it together. I had shared that I needed their help for all of us to be successful. It was then that the lower school principal had admitted it had been a mistake to go to the superintendent in August to complain. We had come to an understanding that we would work together. Even in later conversations, we had all believed that we were working better together. So to find out now that the upper level principal was going behind my back, surprised me. I guess what surprised me more was that anyone could act that way. After the way the CHHS faculty had treated me, I do not know why I was still surprised that people could behave in this way.

Prior to this episode, the principals had told me that we were all working well together and getting along. They repeated this after I asked them how they felt when a PD was held especially for us. Because the CAO had held the district-wide PD on the same day as we were holding our PD at the high school, we had missed his PD for principals. Thus when we were held accountable for this information, which we had
never received, he decided to hire a coach and hold a special PD for the CTLA, the two principals, and myself. During the PD, I made a statement that at the beginning—while we were making adjustments and getting things going—people might have to take work home and do it after they put their kids to bed. At the end of the PD, I asked if I could speak to my team before it dispersed. We met for less than a minute to make sure that we were all on the same page for the next day, then left. The next morning the superintendent paid a visit to the school to yell and reprimand me for having made the statements that I had, and asked who I thought I was by keeping the principals after she had dismissed them. She also accused me of telling the principals that they could not put their kids to bed because they needed to work. Why anyone would think that I had said such a thing, I do not know. She claimed that this was why our team was not working well together. Yet according to what the principals had been telling me, we all felt as though we were working fine together. It was almost as though we could never live down a mistake.

At another meeting, I was informed that the coach whom they had hired to work with the district would be my new coach. I was open to receiving any support that I could get. I met with her and took the chance of opening up and telling her everything I was experiencing. If she was going to be my coach, she had to know how I was feeling and why. She agreed that the way I was being treated was wrong and could be considered bullying and verbal abuse. As a former principal herself, she agreed that I had no autonomy to do my job. I asked her to help me manage up so that I could have a chance to do my job.
While all this was happening, I was also working with a committee on the major physical renovations and technology upgrades at the school. I was advocating for a security system for the school. It had security issues that included external doors that could be pulled open. The previous year, there had been a break-in and vandalism that had necessitated closing the school for a day because there was no alarm system. There was no way of containment should ever there have been a lock down. A building this size had no security plan. We had also dealt with bomb threats and a shooting threat. Among all the issues, I was also meeting with business owners to negotiate paid internships for every rising senior and negotiating collaborations with other schools and colleges for an early-college option for our students. Seven days a week and fourteen to eighteen hours per day, I kept working. The CAO was also working and recruited a former employee for the COO position. We did post the position and go through a formal interview process but ultimately the person whom central office wanted to hire was hired.

We were all hoping for a new start with the new COO, who seemed much stronger. Right from the beginning he told me that he was to report directly to the superintendent but that he was there to work with me. At the beginning, like me, he was energetic with great ideas and eager to work. I let him know that I was there to support his success and to work together as well. It was clear that the superintendent had turned her hopes and trust toward her new hire. He clearly felt the clout of having the superintendent’s support and went about as if he were going to run the school.

I tried to do everything I was told to do. When I was directed to meet with every School Redesign Team member who expressed frustration with the Commissioner during
his visit, I did. I reported back the themes that came up in meetings. I reported that the teachers merely needed time to adjust to the changes and workload. They were not used to this amount of work but knew it was necessary. They shared some concerns and also acknowledged the concerns I did address. I do not know if the superintendent expected this feedback or liked it, but not much came out of it. Though valuable, it also ate up a lot of my time. Also taking place at this time were investigations on the two principals by the EDHC. Both were being investigated for their evaluation practices or lack thereof, while the upper school principal was also being investigated for his insubordination to me. During this process the EDHC asked various members of the leadership team if they felt that I could lead the school. I know this because three of them told me about it as well as their responses. Each of them said that they shared their concerns about the two principals, and that as long as these two were there, I would not be able to lead the school. They felt that the two principals had to go in order for me to be able to lead.

When the EDHC shared this information with me, I reiterated that it was difficult to lead with two incompetent principals, at least one of who was trying to sabotage me. I also told her that it was difficult to lead with no autonomy or authority and with a superintendent who was bullying me and being verbally abusive. I knew that by saying these things to her, I was truly placing my job in jeopardy. I knew that anything I said would get back to the superintendent. I knew that it was the executive director’s duty to protect the superintendent, and I knew that she knew that the superintendent was at risk. But this was not yet the final straw.

During another meeting, the superintendent openly accused me of lying. Thus in front of everyone, I let her know that I had no reason to lie and that if I had no authority
to run the high school, why would I believe that I had the authority to make decisions that only the superintendent could make? Once again, I stated that I would appreciate being asked what I had said rather than listening to everyone else. I could not even hold a potluck event to build teacher morale because the superintendent told me that it was not about teaching and learning. Why then would I think that I could make a district level budget decision? Shortly afterwards, I got called to another meeting at the superintendent’s office. As I was rushing to make the meeting on time, I knew something bad was about to happen.

At this meeting, I was given a written write-up for something that the superintendent had heard I did, again from another source other than me or those directly involved. I asked from whom they had received this information and why they had not asked the people involved in order to discover the truth. Of course the superintendent did not like this and said that it did not matter. But basically I was receiving the same ultimatum that had been given to the COO. Either I could resign or they would start an investigation that would most likely lead to a termination. I had no problem with their conducting an investigation. I knew that I had not done what they were accusing me of having done. When I asked the CILs whether they had reported that I had ignored them and avoided meeting with them, they said no. They did say that they had shared their frustrations with the CTLA who had become my close colleague. I knew then that the CTLA had also gone and shared inaccurate information with the CAO during her weekly meetings with him.

The CTLA had worked closely with me, putting in long hours. She too had pointed out many areas of incompetence in the two principals. In addition, she had come
to me concerned about the directives that she had been given by the CAO, and I had helped her maneuver those directives with the CAO and the other administrators whom she had been directed to coach. Needless to say, I had no one on my leadership team who was really on my team. There was no need to fight the district. Even if I won, I could not stay and work for a superintendent who clearly did not trust my abilities or want me there. And though the mayor had personally called me a while back to show his support, I felt that I could no longer speak with any of my supporters either in or outside the school. The superintendent and the EDHC made it very clear that they could make sure that I would never work in Massachusetts again. And witnessing the superintendent and the way she treated people, I believed that. Therefore after a month of personal leave, I resigned as planned with the EDHC.

Since the woman’s start as superintendent, five of her central administrators had resigned in addition to a number of principals. I wonder if they all did so under the same type of ultimatum. In her previous district, the superintendent had had a reputation for replacing all principals. Shortly after my departure, I received a call from another principal who spoke to me about what was happening to her; it was pretty much the same as what had happened to me.
Higher Education Experiences

Graduating from high school had seemed a miracle after my tumultuous years. Graduating from college with my undergraduate degree had been a necessity; getting accepted into Harvard’s Graduate School of Education (HGSE), however, was a dream. My early American life had revolved around my dream to go to college. Coming from Korea, the only way I could achieve this dream was through my adopted mothers. They expected only the best from me. After they decided that I was the smartest of the three Koreans they had adopted, they expected me to go to Harvard. That therefore became my expectation. Losing all chances of going to Harvard right out of high school, I set my mind on applying to a doctorate program, more specifically to the Urban Superintendent Program (USP). So, graduating with my bachelor’s degree, I gradually made my way towards Harvard. After finally getting into the neighboring city’s school district, I taught there for four years before someone suggested to me that I apply to Harvard and for the Conant Scholarship. Although it was getting late, I took the GRE and applied. Shortly afterwards, I learned that another teacher had received the scholarship but that I had been accepted into the master’s program. At the time I did not know that I could have applied directly to the doctoral program. I thought I had to go one step at a time and felt that I needed to gain work experience in between.

I took a year’s leave of absence from work to attend school and learned that I would not do that again. Next time I would find a way to continue working while going to school. It may have been due to my high expectations, but I was disappointed with Harvard. As a master’s student I immediately felt like a second-class citizen. Most of the department’s resources, attention, and energy were spent on the doctoral students.
The advisor whom I chose was one of the leading people at the USP since I hoped to make connections in the program. After one conversation, I never saw or heard from him again. I chose to focus on the School Leadership strand with a concentration in the principal certification program. I did not want to spend a year in school and not walk away with at least one more certification.

My expectation of Harvard of being the best university in the world quickly deflated after I attended a couple of classes. The professors seemed far removed from the classroom. When I tried to share my recent urban experiences and observations in one particular class, the professor did not want to hear them because they refuted what he was saying. It was going to be a long nine months. So, when I saw an opportunity to run for president of the Student Government Association (SGA), I jumped on the ballot. I campaigned in front of my classes and put up posters. Unexpectedly, I won.

Serving as president provided a distraction and gave me something enjoyable to do while attending classes. We had a very active association, and the Student Affairs office remarked that we were more active than we had been in a long time. We organized a number of activities to improve student-life experience. We collaborated with other colleges to hold a living wage sit-in and rally. We supported other universities in their effort to uphold affirmative action. We pushed HGSE to increase tenure opportunities for professors of color. I served on the Harvard Graduate Council representing HGSE. As SGA president, I served on the screening committee for the new college president and the new HGSE dean. I hosted the awards ceremony. These were some of the things I did in my capacity as president while attending classes and making the best of a disappointing dream come true.
During the principal certification program I had to find a school in which to conduct my internship. The program included a cohort model and modules for topics, such as observations, analysis, and research for better teaching. There was no follow-up or support after graduation and placement in an administrative position. Just as the professors seemed as though they had no time for us and appeared unapproachable due to their status, so did the resources. I am sure they were there, but unless we really sought support and resources, they were not easily available. Ultimately, the HGSE experience was fine but a letdown compared to a lifetime’s high expectations. When I returned to work after graduation, it was not the HGSE principal’s certification that got me an administration job, but participation in the district’s principal development program. All the same, I now had a Harvard degree and, in a roundabout way, my dream had been fulfilled. I was a step closer to meeting my biological mother’s expectations.

I worked as an assistant headmaster for a few years before I learned about a three-year doctoral program at Boston College (BC). It would allow me to keep on working and attend classes on weekends and during the summer. It sounded perfect and the tuition was reasonable. I applied and was accepted. It was a cohort model. After a couple of months of classes, I found myself sitting in the back of the class. While sitting there, I looked around and asked myself what I was doing at a non-Ivy League institution. How did I go from Harvard to BC? In addition, BC had a limited reputation outside the region. As an executive model, I wanted to attend a university that had a quality reputation and high standards, at least higher than those at BC. So I dropped out.

A number of years later, I realized that I had to return to earn a doctorate. I had this inner need and motivation to get the degree. I knew that in order to keep climbing up
the career ladder I needed the highest degree possible in the field. But there was also a subconscious reason for my wanting the doctorate. I felt compelled to get the highest possible degree for my Korean mother. I did not want her sacrifice to be wasted. I had to honor her by going back to school. Knowing that it had to be at an Ivy League school, I researched the different doctoral programs and came up with two possibilities—the program at Teachers College (TC) at Columbia University, and the Mid-Career Doctoral Program (MC) at University of Pennsylvania. The program at TC was undergoing revisions and I did not want to be a part of an experiment. MC, on the other hand, had earned credibility and validity from its many years as a successful program. I thus chose to apply to the MC program. It would allow me to keep working while going to school, and, as long as I stayed on track, finish in three years. At HGSE, I had learned that I needed to apply theory to practice. I was not someone who was into theory alone.

I was working at Global Business Academy when I received the call informing me that I had been accepted into the program. I was so excited! Everything started as planned, but then one thing led to another and the completion of my degree was delayed. Still, the experience was very different from the one at HGSE. Perhaps it was because I was now in a doctoral program, but I also attribute the difference to the persona of UPENN’s faculty. The professors here were far more down to earth and approachable. So much so that professors collaborated with students and alumni on publications and research. We were valued for the experiences and expertise that we brought to the program. Communication was regular and opportunities were provided on a monthly basis. There was a clear network of alumni who were working in high profile positions. Also telling was that a number of alumni were on the UPENN and MC faculty. Now I
looked forward to completing my doctorate and joining the alumni, but more importantly, to completing my goal of honoring my mother’s sacrifice at the highest level.
V. Chapter Five - Life-Stories Analyses

After completing a guided life review, which resulted in personal and professional lifelines, I wrote seven life-stories. I chose these events and times due to the importance I feel they have played in who I am and how I reached where I am. As I began analyzing the stories in order to find the meanings behind them and ultimately answer my research questions, I noticed that my first two stories were not about a specific moment in time, but rather an overview of a period. As I read and reread the first two life-stories, then my personal lifeline, several themes seemed to emerge—love, pain, the value of education, resiliency, independence, survival, strength, and even leadership.

The Unknown Trigger Event Leading To Education And The Early Years

Reflecting on these early life-stories through the lens of authentic leader development is extremely important for understanding who I am and why. More specifically, the writing of my life-stories and my reflection on them has reminded me of the origins of my core values and beliefs. I learned what love and sacrifice were through the difficult act of my mother. Regardless of whether or not my heart could understand the act, I had been at the receiving end of a selfless love simply so that I could have access to opportunities and a better life. Through this and reinforcement from my adopted mothers, I learned the value of education. For all the damage my adopted mothers had done, they had instilled in me the importance of education.

I had experienced what it was like to live in poverty in two different countries under two different circumstances. I had learned to be resourceful and had figured out how to survive on my own. I had experienced what it was like to lose everything and...
have my self-worth taken away from me. Afterwards I learned how to work hard to have what I needed and wanted. More importantly, I had been relentless in getting back my self-worth, my value as a human being.

My life-stories touch upon several themes that deserve more attention and play an integral role in my current being. While I had overcome many of my early struggles by myself, there had been people, especially in America, that had been there to help. When I started struggling with my adopted mothers, there had been a family for whom I babysat that had become my friends and mentors, especially the mother. Our connection had been adoption. They told me that it had been after meeting me that they had decided to adopt a baby girl from Korea. When I decided to turn myself into social services, this family had offered me their home instead of a foster home. As kind as they were, I could not take their offer. There was a part of me that did not want to jeopardize our relationship should the living arrangement not work out. I did not want to disappoint them or myself in case I did not meet their expectations. It was through their mentorship that I met my high school guidance counselors. They were all friends.

Once in high school, I had been officially assigned one of the two guidance counselors, but both of these friends of my mentors were there for me. It was the support and assistance of these two counselors that had made high school tolerable. They had helped arrange my school schedule so that I could work multiple jobs. It was they who had helped me get free lunch tickets and manage my challenged relationship with the teachers. It was they along with my mentors who were there believing in me.

There was another important friend who taught me a great deal during these difficult years. I met him when I was fifteen and at my first job. I did not see him again
until several years later and we started dating. I was seventeen and he was twenty.

Through all my tumultuous years in high school, he was always there. He was the one who stood by me through thick and thin. Together we worked our way out of poverty. It was he who taught me about entrepreneurship and taking chances. When life grew dark and scary, it was he who stood by me.

Realizing and acknowledging that I had not gone through life totally alone might not have seemed that relevant until I began thinking about how I have approached my adult life both on a personal and professional level. Yes, there was much of my life, if not most of it, that I had gone through and overcome on my own. But it was important to understand that there were people who cared and who genuinely helped. Admitting this does not take away from my accomplishments or diminish my ability to overcome struggles. It does show me, however, that in order to have done all I did, I needed to trust and allow people into my life. It shows me that I am capable of that. There are different degrees of trust. It is not that I do not trust others personally or professionally, but I do need to explore my willingness to trust at the level I need in order to benefit fully from relationships. I will return to this topic as I analyze some of my other life-stories.

While they did mention my leadership involvement in my community, my life-stories did not include several other leadership roles that I had held in my early years. Although I never really thought of myself as a leader, in eighth grade I ran for class president and won. I remember giving a speech over the intercom and ending it with: “Harvard, here I come!” I am not sure exactly what role I was supposed to play; it might have been a title more than anything. I remember receiving the American Legion Award at graduation but I do not recall leading anything. Granted it was at a Catholic school and
the highest grade was the eighth grade. But this was not the last time that I would hold an office.

In high school, as crazy as those years were, I remember serving as the secretary of the school’s student council during my sophomore year. I do not recall the process I went through to get elected, but I do remember taking minutes of meetings. I also remember planning and implementing school assemblies and organizing other school functions. I never thought of this as being a leader or as acting in a leadership role. I simply saw it as something to do and something I was good at and actually liked doing. It did not seem anything special.

I must also briefly mention my positions on the Asian Pacific Advisory Board (the first year I served as a representative, the second as the board’s vice-chair) and the school district’s Desegregation/Integration Advisory Council. Once again I did not view myself as a leader or view these positions as leadership positions. I simply saw them as opportunities to serve my community and support causes that I believed in. Whenever I could serve, I felt that it was my responsibility to do so. But does this make me a leader, and if so, what does it say about my leadership?

As I reflect on these life-stories of my early years, I understand why I take such a strong stance on my core beliefs and values, and where they come from. Throughout my life I experienced what it was like having material things and then not. I experienced having a home, then being homeless. I experienced having the love of a family and then none. I lived through having self-worth, losing it, then gaining it back. I stole knowing that it was wrong to steal. I experienced so much life in those early years. And it was through those early years that I learned the value of education, hard work, honesty, and
the difference between right and wrong. It was through those early years that I learned that there was no greater worth than self-worth. It was through my early life experiences that I learned that material things will be taken away but integrity cannot be taken away. It can only be given up. I developed a sense of social justice for which I needed to fight. It was through my early life experiences that I learned to love and respect our children. I do not want any child to endure the things that I had to or experience anything that will hurt her/him. This is the foundation that has driven my actions and decisions as a professional. My personal life is at the root of my professional life. So how does this relate to my becoming an authentic leader now?
Transition To Urban And High School

My third life-story once again covers a three-year period with a focus on my third year of teaching and my first year of teaching at an urban high school rather than consisting of a specific event or moment. Although I held no formal leadership role at this point, I did have an opportunity to take on responsibilities as an informal leader at the high school level. Before I move on to analyze these roles, I would like to discuss how I went about acting out my role as teacher.

From the very start of my career, it was clear to me that the beliefs and values that I had developed while growing up would be embodied in my actions not only in my everyday life also but in my life as a teacher. I welcomed my students with respect and taught them in the belief that they could go far beyond what the limited curriculum expected of them. I taught my students the value of education, hard work, and doing and being the very best. As I reflect on those early years of teaching, I realize that I was treating my students in the way that I wish I had been treated. I loved and respected them in the way that I wish I had been throughout my childhood. I wanted to protect my students from as much pain and injustice as possible. Especially when it came to my first graders, I wanted them to hold on to their child-like innocence for as long as they could. It was different with my high school students, however.

Once I transitioned to high school, the effect of a difficult teenage life became quite noticeable. Not only did the years of limited access to a quality education and opportunities become apparent, but also the years of injustice that the students had endured. At this point it was no longer about preserving their innocence; it was too late for that. They had already witnessed too much. It was about teaching them as much
about life survival as I was teaching them about math and science. I knew that these students knew how to survive and maneuver the obstacles in their lives. They had gotten this far by doing so, but I was trying to teach them that they had a choice when it came to the lives they lived. I wanted them to know what they needed to do if they wanted to choose a path out of their struggling circumstances. By getting to know my students, I also got to know the challenges they were facing and the injustices they were being served by so many forces in their lives. I was so invested in them that I saw their hurt and felt their pain. In them I saw myself.

Once I began teaching, my belief in this vocation was cemented by how natural and easily teaching came to me. There was something about the way in which my students and I got along. It was as though I had a heightened understanding of them because of my childhood. No one else knew my students the way I did, and because of this, I had tunnel vision. Thinking back to those years, this tunnel vision—a theme that may still hold true of my current practice—had me thinking that I knew best. I did not consciously think this, but I suspect that many of my actions prove it. It did not help that during those early years I did experience much success and was able to support my struggling colleagues.

When my colleagues were struggling or our unit had issues, I remember providing solutions. My focus was not so much on collectively understanding the problem or addressing its root causes; it was on what I could do to help new teachers survive and help our unit survive. It was not that I thought I was better than the other teachers, but for some reason I was not struggling the way my colleagues were. Maybe it was due to
an inherent knowledge, but I simply knew how to relate to students and had a firm understanding of what they needed: respect, stability, and consistency.

Thinking back, those years were about sink-or-swim, and I remember our headmaster stating just that. He brought us new teachers together and threw us into the thick of teaching challenges, where we could either sink or swim. This was the sort of challenge to which I was accustomed; it was all about swimming, survival. I had survived thus far and it seemed only natural. Perhaps this experience was foreign to my colleagues, but I was in familiar territory. When I was a teacher, my thoughts were nowhere around leadership.

Eventually I did learn that I had been hired to play something of a leadership role. My headmaster explained to me how he had worked around the system and hired me to fill the Literacy Specialist position while knowing that he wanted me to teach math. This meant that I had to meet some of the requirements of being the Literacy Specialist. The only negative about it was leaving my classroom for trainings and regular district meetings. As many teachers know, it is more work to prepare materials for a substitute teacher than being there to teach.

The trainings were informative. We learned how to be facilitators, coaches, and how to help teachers to integrate literacy across all curricular areas. (It was amusing that others at the trainings thought I was an ESL teacher simply because I was Asian.) The downside was that I did not really get an opportunity to practice these newly learned facilitation and coaching skills. There was a minimal amount of work I did in order to satisfy the district’s requirements for funding the position. I worked primarily with my unit but also with a few teachers outside of the unit. I shared information and strategies
but did not really get to coach the teachers as I should have, or facilitate professional development at the school. Because I was teaching a full caseload, I did not have the time to serve as Literacy Specialist in the truest sense. A similar thing happened when I served as Math Specialist the following years.

This is an important factor in my leadership development because being both a literacy and math specialist early in my teaching years offered me opportunities to develop my leadership skills. Instead, I learned to serve a leadership role at its minimum and had very little opportunity to practice the skills I was learning. The main goal of my daily work was to survive teaching and support my colleagues in the same. I did this knowing what I knew best, fending for myself, and reinforcing others’ belief that I needed very little help.

Was it bad that I needed so little support? Was it detrimental to my leadership development that I was successful in all that I was doing? Was my success nurturing this subconscious belief that I had all the answers and knew best? Again, I did not think about this back then. It is a thought that returns to me now as I reflect on how those years compared to the ones that followed. Would I be authentic if I were not consciously acting as though I knew best? At that time I was doing the best that I could for the team, in the best interest of the students.
Starting A New Small School

Serving as an administrator was different from and, in some ways more challenging, than teaching in the classroom. Instead of teaching students, I now found myself teaching teachers. Yet this is why I moved on to administration; I wanted to impact more students by impacting their teachers. The problem was that I did not realize that grown professionals were even less eager to learn than were students. Starting in administration at Roosevelt High School was eye opening in a number of ways, both positive and negative.

In my first several years as an assistant headmaster, I proved myself competent in a variety of skill sets. By observing and learning from my headmaster at Bunker Hill High School, I learned how to create a master schedule. Now I was able to put that skill to good use and start my tenure as an assistant headmaster by restructuring the high school and, along the way, create new programs that increased graduation rates. I proved that I was not only a strong disciplinarian in the classroom but that I could have a positive impact on the culture of the school as a whole. I also had the experience of leading a large team in analyzing data, altering teaching practices, and drastically improving student performance. At the same time, I witnessed teachers of color acting as some of the worst examples and role models for their students. I was part of a leadership team led by a headmaster who was a skilled manager. I also saw the headmaster mentor a teacher interested in becoming an administrator based on her belief in supporting her gender and race. There was a lot that I learned before moving on to Global Business Academy (GBA).
While the work I was doing may have been new, I was in familiar territory at GBA. The years there were positive and a success for both the school and myself. At least if success was measured by student performance, access to opportunities for students and teachers, and the school’s overall standing. I felt successful because I accomplished a great deal for GBA, and I was integral to building the new school. I was also highly successful at networking with business organizations, higher education institutions, and community leaders. Everywhere I went, I networked for the betterment of the students and the school. When it came to networking for the students, it was easy. Yet reflecting on these years through the lens of authentic leadership, I am not so sure I was that successful.

The familiarity of working at GBA came from having the autonomy to do what I felt was the right thing to do and in the best interest of the students. This was much like being in the classroom and similar to my years at Roosevelt. There I had had a conversation with the headmaster and told her that she needed to trust me. She needed to tell me what she wanted done and give me the autonomy to get it done. I was clear any form of micro-management would only hinder my abilities and capacity to do my best work. This also entered into my conversation with the headmaster at GBA before I agreed to move to the school.

I did my best work alone. Of course, building and starting a school is not a job done alone, but what worked well for me at GBA was that only when I had to involve others did I work with them. When it came to setting the business curriculum, I consulted only the teachers necessary to its fulfillment see what they could teach in the content area. Other than that, I went ahead and partnered with a national organization to
implement one of its career academies, based only on my experience and knowledge and the approval of the headmaster. When coming up with new programming or ideas, I consulted only those directly impacted and only those that I absolutely had to. I involved teachers only if they benefited the outcome of what I was trying to do. This worked well, but it kept teachers in their world and me in mine.

While I was busy building all these innovative programs and partnerships, the teachers were teaching and doing what they had to but—I am sure—with no sense of ownership or buy into the new school. This went against what I believed. I always believed that one of the key responsibilities of a good leader was an ability to plan for sustainability. This requires the involvement of those people who are there for the everyday grind, those who will remain when the leadership has moved on. If people are a part of the process, they are more apt to buy into what is developing and actually help the idea flourish. But here I was, excluding the teachers. Thus when they did not see the relevance of integrating the school’s theme of business and finance into their lessons (wherever applicable), they could not be blamed.

If I truly believed in the importance of collaboration and teacher empowerment, which I do, then I was not being true to myself. As I reflect back, I now ask myself why I acted so inauthentically. It goes back to how I lived much of my life, doing things for myself and by myself. I was not confident in the abilities of teachers or their investment in our students. I trust myself but I do not trust others. I did not trust the teachers enough to give them opportunities to demonstrate whether or not I could have confidence in them. For those who did earn my confidence through their teaching and professional behavior, I did reach out and collaborate on various opportunities.
The focus of my work has not been relationship building with teachers. I have never had issues building relationships with students, but my stance with adults has been different. Students are still learning and growing and need to be taught. With that and them I have patience. Teachers, on the other hand, are adults and trained professionals. My expectations for them are higher. During my tenure, I have met far more teachers who have not met my expectations than those who have. In reality, my expectations are not that high. I expect teachers to care about their students and do their best to educate them. I do not think that is unreasonable. Therefore, when I see teachers who are not doing this, I lose respect for them. At GBA, I had someone else deal with teacher relations.

The headmaster of GBA gave me autonomy to go out and do what I do best: create, design, and innovate. The headmaster did what he did best. While I was doing what I was doing, the headmaster maintained relationships with the teachers and served as the buffer whenever necessary. If teachers needed to vent or be heard about something, they went to the headmaster. These were usually the teachers who had developed a relationship with the headmaster at the large high school before it had broken up into four small schools. One of the reasons why these teachers had chosen this school, in fact, was because they knew the headmaster. The teachers who came to me were usually the new hires or those who were like-minded. This was part of the relationship and partnership between my supervisor and myself.

It is not that I did not work with teachers at all, it is simply that I did so only when I had to. There were issues I needed to work out with them. While our relations were not all “kumbaya,” they were cordial. For example, when we had to implement the
humanities curriculum, it took collaboration and compromise on all sides. I explained the
district mandates then listened to the teachers’ concerns before devising a hybrid
curriculum that was acceptable both to them and the district. I also did not create the
curriculum; I provided support for the teachers to create their own curriculum. While it
would have been easier simply to tell the teachers what they needed to teach, listening to
them and trying to meet their concerns made them more accountable for trying to teach
the curriculum.

It is in my capacity to work with adults, to collaborate and provide teachers with
opportunities to be a part of the process. The difficulty emerges when the adults do not
put the needs of the students first. The compromise of the humanities curriculum was not
necessarily in the best interest of the students. It was all about the teachers, what they
wanted, and what they were willing to do. Granted we do not want teachers teaching
something they do not know, but these teachers knew that they would have to teach
humanities before they chose to work at this school. They could have chosen to go to
another school where they could have taught their specific content area. Yet because
they were thinking only of themselves, they were once again jeopardizing our students
and their chance of getting the best education possible.

Upon reflection, I might have been authentic in my approach at GBA, but I really
was not an authentic leader. To be a leader one needs followers. I cannot say I truly had
followers at GBA. I had a faculty complying with what it absolutely had to do in order to
do its job. Then again, a few of my hires actually did follow me because they believed in
my vision and shared my beliefs about our work. But more so than not, I was
implementing what Robert Evans terms the methodology of innovation; most of the innovations at GBA, if not all, were top-down (Evans, 1996).

If I am to develop into a truly authentic leader who cultivates an environment that develops authentic followers, I need to change my outlook on teachers and the adults who work with our children. I need to respect them as much as I respect our students. I need to be as patient and compassionate with them as I am with students. I need to learn to trust adults and not judge them as harshly because their commitment to the work is different from mine. I need to remember to be a teacher of teachers and to accept the differences from being a teacher of students. By doing so, I will be working towards building better relationships with the adults at the school. Without this relationship, the change I seek will not take place in a sustainable and scalable manner.

I selected this period in my professional life because it marked a point in time when I had a positive experience as a leader. Now that I have spent time scrutinizing those years through the lens of authentic leadership, my perspective has changed. It has not changed with respect to the positive experience factor, but I can now reflect on those years in a way that helps me identify the areas in which I need to work in order to develop into an authentic leader. Although I have thought about these years before, I have never done so in the same way.
My Own School

In all my years in education, I was never as impacted by the treatment of others as I was at Castle Hill High School (CHHS). I had been ridiculed by students, chastised by parents, and mocked by teachers. But never before in my professional life had I endured such cruelty from adult employees. I have spent many hours reflecting on what happened at CHHS. Now when I examine that time through the lens of authentic leadership, I am able to take a different perspective and see more clearly what happened and my role in it.

It was a set-up from the very beginning and I was the one who set myself up. I charged into the headmaster position like a bull into a china cabinet. I made the classic mistake of starting to lead by running rather than by listening and learning. I started by creating and implementing an entry plan modeled on the template provided by Barry Jentz (2008). I conducted a teacher survey and held individual and small group meetings with various stakeholders. I collected and read the data. But that was it. All this I did at the end of the previous school year, and in the summer I actually assumed the position. Instead of continuing with the entry plan, I immediately zeroed in on the issues of the school. I never completed the entry plan.

What little information I did gather from the entry plan remained in my notes. My focus was on the school data. Once I realized the issues, it became clear to me what needed to be done. While this kind of ability can be a gift, it can also be a curse. Identifying issues and creating solutions comes naturally to me. My issue lies in how I engage and empower my faculty and staff to identify issues and find solutions with me or on their own. Most often, I do not. As I had at GBA, I started at CHHS very much on my own. At GBA there were only three administrators, I being one of them. At CHHS, I
had a leadership team of at least five upper level administrators and a number of teacher leaders. There was no need to go into my new position alone.

In addition to being in the habit of working on my own and for myself (a survival strategy I had developed as a child), I have discovered another reason why I go into leadership positions running. I always feel an urgency to improve things and get things done as quickly as possible. Many of our students’ lives are impacted by everything that we do; every minute and opportunity lost may be a life lost. The problem is that not everyone has this same sense of urgency. What I have experienced, especially at CHHS, is that I go ahead and find remedies for the betterment of students but at my own expense—at the expense of my ability to remain in the leadership position.

By not taking the time to fully implement the entry plan and engage appropriately with my leadership team, I made a fatal decision. The replacement of teachers who were serving as disciplinarians with community field coordinators was not a bad solution. What made it bad was my decision to report it to the teachers prematurely. Even though I was staying true to myself and being respectful, I would not have lost my integrity by waiting. I could have waited and presented the problem to the leadership team and other responsible stakeholders such as the School Site Council and given them the opportunity to come up with a solution. They might have come up with the same solution or even a better one. In that way the solution would have been the result of a team process and made the team feel accountable. It would also have made it far more difficult for members of the team to target me as the culprit and the butt of their revenge.

The problems and conflict I faced at CHHS was all due to the fact that I thought I knew best; I had all the answers. This created a divided environment because I did not
trust my team enough to make them part of my team. Half the faculty had an allegiance to one of the assistant headmasters and very few of them (only my hires) had any allegiance to me. Those with no allegiance were held captive by their possible need for future union support and thus went along with the assistant headmaster’s team. This was all my doing.

In my prior reflections, I tended to focus too much on what everyone else had done to me. Even when writing the story, I dwelled on the number of issues and concerns, what I did to solve them, and how the school retaliated against me. But now is the first time that I realize that all that was caused by my own doing or lack of doing. Granted the problems did exist and I did not create them, but by starting the position working on my own, I created a whole set of problems for myself. Not only did I do so at the school, but also outside the school, at central office.

In prior positions, my immediate supervisor had always been the headmaster at the school level. Now that I was the headmaster, I had several levels of supervisors at central office. Ultimately my top supervisor was the superintendent, but her designee was the academic superintendent and below him, the assistant academic superintendent. As an assistant headmaster, I worked directly and daily with the headmaster. We always knew what we were doing and were in direct communication about everything. I never did anything that the headmaster did not know about. My headmaster made it a point to connect with me either through formal team meetings, individual meetings, and/or informal communications. This was not the case with my supervisors once I became headmaster.
As a headmaster, I made it a point to set up a structure in which I was in direct communications with my leadership team at CHHS on a regular and as-needed basis. This meant meeting at least once a day to several times a day. With my supervisors, I had very little contact or communication. It is understandable that two people who oversee more than thirty-five high schools have limited time for individual communications with every headmaster. Considering that it was my first year as headmaster, I do not think it was unreasonable to expect a bit more communication. To expect more outreach from the assigned mentor was not unreasonable either. In either case, it did not happen. But as I reflect back, it was just as much my responsibility as theirs to reach out and communicate.

So much of my life, both personal and professional, has taken place in a sink-or-swim scenario. It did not feel any different at CHHS, and I was determined to swim. More importantly, I was determined to make right the inequities that faced the students due to the very adults who were supposed to be their advocates. It did not dawn on me to manage my supervisors as much as those I had been hired to supervise. From the beginning, I should have found a way to keep in communication with my two direct supervisors, the Academic Superintendent of High Schools, and his assistant academic superintendent. It could have been a simple daily memo or email informing them of the issues I was uncovering and how I planned to resolve them. This way, when my supervisors received anonymous letters from faculty with concerns and complaints, they would have had another perspective on what was going on at the school, as well as what I was doing. Because we had no real communications, my supervisors had no real sense of what was going on or an understanding of my perspective. Their only perspective was
that of the teachers whose specific agenda was to have me removed and who had inundated them with communications.

Prior to my arrival, CHHS had had a decent reputation in the district. It was a school that did not make too much noise and stayed low on the radar. Then I came along and brought all the issues to the forefront—but not at the central office level, only at the level of the school leadership team. The school team knew what was going on so this was no surprise. The ASHS was new to the district and had no understanding of what was really going on at the school. It was my responsibility as the headmaster to inform and keep my supervisors in the know, just as I had done at Global Business Academy as the assistant headmaster.

There is no guarantee that better communication and management of my supervisors would have changed the outcome. However, had I made more of an effort in that respect and taken the stance of learning before running into the leadership role, had I built relationships and trust with my team and taken it slower in order to be able to go faster, I may not have set myself up for what I endured in my short tenure at Castle Hill High School.
Another Chance

In earlier reflections on my experience at Seaside High School (SHS), I focused primarily on how the superintendent had treated me, how I had felt bullied and verbally abused by her. Having undergone that kind of emotional and mental stress, it was difficult for me to analyze the situation through any other lens. Now that some time has passed and I have gained some distance, it is easier for me to look differently at the nine months at SHS. While I could not have changed the personality of the superintendent, there were things that I could have done differently and that may have had an impact on the experience and outcome.

From the outset, I should have taken more time to determine whether this was the right position and situation for me. But once again, I was enamored by the position and its roles and responsibilities; it was exactly the sort of work I was hungry to take on. In the years leading up to it, I had begun feeling that I was sinking into that abyss of dreading my job and doing only what I had to and nothing more. I was nearing the point at which I had promised myself to leave the profession if I became the kind of “employee” who only went to work to collect a paycheck. So when a dream position was offered to me, I fell for it.

I did ask several of my former supervisors, who knew the superintendent. Neither mentioned any concerns or shared any information that would have led me to believe that it would be a bad experience. What I did not look into was the hiring of the two principals. The superintendent had hired them at the same time that she had hired me. Considering how closely the two principals and I had to work, I really should have been involved in that hiring process. Only later did I learn that these two principals had
actually applied for the headmaster position and been offered the principal roles. This explained their passive animosity as we continued to work together. Nevertheless, I should have started our working relationship differently than I did.

Under the circumstances, I was trying to be considerate of their current working situations and only had them do what was absolutely necessary until they started their positions full-time. The rest I was doing on my own with some help from the team at the high school. Although I tried to be respectful and considerate, I may have made the principals feel insignificant and not part of the team. In addition to the one dinner meeting that we had with the superintendent and the chief academic officer, I should have arranged a meeting of our own to start building our team and a working relationship. The turnaround plan did call for two retreats for the leadership team; these never took place. I should have made them a priority, knowing the importance of a solid team that shared a vision. A retreat may also have made me more aware of how I was addressing my concerns about their competence or lack thereof.

The problem was not so much that I thought that I knew more than they did, but that their prior experiences had not prepared them for doing what we were charged with doing at SHS. Neither principal had much experience with urban education or turnaround work. While I did have limited experience in turnaround work I had a lot of experience in urban schools, a situation that always generates a sense of urgency. But I was being my usual self when dealing with incompetent people. I lost respect for the two principals, and I only counted on them when I absolutely had to. What I should have done is hold them accountable for their responsibilities and, if these were not clear, clarified them. If their work was not at the level it needed to be, I should have
communicated this specifically and allowed them to redo it until they learned to do it and performed at the expected level. This would have made all of us and not just me accountable, even though the headmaster was ultimately accountable. I needed to help the principals see their roles as being as important as I did my role as headmaster. Instead, I think I did the opposite. Granted some of the decisions made by the superintendent did not help our situation, nonetheless, right from the outset I did not build the team needed to ensure success for all of us, especially for the students. Had I done so, the superintendent may also have made different decisions regarding who would supervise the leadership team working under me at the high school. I was given no authority to evaluate the leadership team. The two principals reported to the superintendent, while the chief of teaching and learning reported to the chief academic officer. When I assumed the job, this was not the set-up.

This might not have been the case had I been able to demonstrate to the superintendent that I was capable of managing my relationship with my leadership team. Based on the lessons I had learned from my experience at Castle Hill High School, I became more attentive to the timing of my decisions and communications with faculty. I paid attention to their needs and to what I was doing to meet these needs as best as I could under the circumstances. I was focusing on building a trusting relationship and environment. What I did not focus on was how to manage my relationship with the superintendent. This was something I should have learned to do better at Castle Hill but did not.

In hindsight, I should have put much more effort into communicating with the superintendent and doing so differently. At Castle Hill, I hardly ever saw or spoke with
my supervisors, so it seemed paramount to initiate communication. At SHS, I was in
daily communication with the superintendent. If I was not communicating directly with
her, I was doing so through other staff that worked with the high school, such as the
Turnaround Manager or the Business Manager. But this was not the only type of
communication that I needed to be doing. There were various moments—especially after
an episode of being yelled at and criticized by the superintendent—when I realized that I
needed to provide the superintendent with a weekly or daily update on every detail that I
was working on at the high school. Yet every time I tried to do so, I recollect thinking
about how much more work that was and how much time it took away from everything
else that needed to be done. Plus she was receiving various reports on how we were
implementing the turnaround plan according to the timeline. I simply felt that it was such
a waste of my time as I could already barely keep up with all her demands. To my
dismay, I did not provide regular detailed updates on everything I was doing at the high
school.

Because I was not managing all the information delivered to the superintendent,
she was hearing other interpretations and perspectives that were not always in my favor.
While I knew there were people who wanted to see me fail, I did not expect them to be
those that were allegedly on my team. I am not talking about the teaching staff, the
families or the community organizations. In fact, I received the most support from
community organizations and businesses. In the end, it was the very people who were
supposed to be working with me that turned against me. I should have known my team
members better and not thought naively that everyone was there for the same reasons that
I was. I should have been more astute about the intentions of those working closest to
me. I should have managed those relationships as well as the one with the superintendent better.

It is true that I cannot control or predict the actions of others. But it is also true that I cannot criticize others for everything that they do. I need to realize and acknowledge the part that I play in making people act the way they do, and make changes accordingly. At SHS, I could not have predicted the personality of the superintendent or the backstabbing of my leadership team. The things that took place may very well have taken place regardless. But had I taken the time to make sure that this was the right position for me instead of being enamored by it, I may not have taken the position in the first place. Or, I may have done so anyway. All the same, I should never have underestimated the importance of managing up as well as managing down. I should also have prioritized relationship building on all levels.

Before completing this analysis, however, I need to address my reaction to my treatment by the superintendent. There is no doubt in my mind that I was bullied, verbally abused, and threatened by the superintendent. Had a parent come to the school to report his/her child being treated this way by a teacher there would have been an investigation with consequences for the teacher. So why—when at any other time or when anyone else was being mistreated, I had no qualms about stepping in and advocating for them—did I not stand up for myself? Every time I was yelled at or chastised, I, like a little girl, shriveled up inside, just as I used to when my cruel adopted mother had yelled at me in the same way. I remember having conversations in my mind while the superintendent was shouting at me. I would tell myself that I was no longer that little girl and that I did
not need to take this. But each time, I was in disbelief that an adult, a trained professional could treat me, or anyone in such a degrading manner.

Growing up I was taught never to talk back to my elders. I was supposed to respect and honor them. How could I talk back to my elders, especially my supervisor? Now, rationally I know the differences between talking back, being disrespectful, and refusing to tolerate mistreatment. But I find that in certain situations such as this one, I lose confidence in my ability to advocate for myself. I am as confident as could be when it comes to my work. Why is it that this confidence disappears in situations where I need to confront my superiors?

Before I started teaching, I reflected a great deal on my past and addressed as best as I could the issues that had haunted me since childhood. I wanted to be consciously aware of them and work through the ones I could before entering the classroom. I did not want them reflected in my behavior or treatment of the children. They could not be at the receiving end of my negative issues. I do feel that I did a good job of not bringing my issues into the classroom. But now, as I reflect back on my experience with the superintendent at SHS, I clearly see that there are still some issues that I need to address. It had simply never occurred to me that I had to worry about my past creeping in when dealing with my supervisors. It appears that sometimes we are even more authentic than we want to be. I was being true to myself by not defending myself to the superintendent.
Higher Education Experiences

From the moment I left Korea, I knew that no matter what I did, I would do to my very best. Of course at the age of seven and coming from a family in another country, I had no clue what that would entail, but it did not take me long to learn that doing my best meant doing well in school and continuing until I received the highest degree possible in a field. Early on, under the direction of my adopted mothers, the field was going to be medicine or law. In time it proved to be education.

Fortunately, I did excel in academics and so my adopted mothers expected me to attend Harvard University. I knew nothing of Harvard except what I had been told; it was the best university in the country, if not the world. Growing up, I never really experienced the college application process. Despite being an educator who has helped many students through the college application process—from SAT preparation courses, to researching colleges, writing college essays, and completing actual applications and federal financial aid forms—I never underwent the experience in this way. I do vaguely remember applying to colleges. I really did not understand college as being anything more than an institution for higher learning. In hindsight, I now know that college is also very much about networking with classmates as well as professors.

It was not until I actually did enroll at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education (HGSE) for my master’s degree in education that I realized that I was not all that aware of the nuances of graduate school. When selecting a concentration under a particular major, I had not looked any deeper than the general information. I had simply applied and been accepted. Now it was time for me to select courses on my own, and I did. I selected courses that I thought would grant me a stronger knowledge of public
education, that would help me understand unions, working with the community and dealing with the politics, etc. Having also selected the principal certification program, I needed to fulfill the requirements, which limited the number of electives I could take. At the time, this seemed to serve its purpose; in hindsight, however, I should have chosen differently.

One of the advantages of attending an institution such as Harvard is the possibility of networking. The professors are world-renowned and experts in their fields. As a student at HGSE, I could have cross-registered and taken courses at a number of other graduate schools, and thus expanded network opportunities. Students at Harvard are potential leaders and future experts. As a student at HGSE, I could have thought of myself as such. But no, I simply considered myself a lowly student fortunate to have made it and one who was finally meeting the expectations of my adopted mothers and living up to the hopes of my biological mother.

Meeting my cruel adopted mother’s expectations is what I had been trying to do my entire American life until that point. It is amazing how a desire for a person’s approval can overtake your life. I do not know why, but it meant everything to me to have this mom’s approval. Eventually I worked past it and her approval became irrelevant, but at that point in my life, it was still quite relevant. Now, as I reflect back, I ask myself: was going to Harvard my dream or an effort to win my adopted mother’s approval? It now seems as though this was her expectation of me and that it had embedded itself into my brain before I could even speak English. In that case, when did it become my expectation of myself? I do believe that it was my expectation of myself because I am all about being the best I can be and achieving the most I can. These are the
values that I developed growing up. But had it not been that important to meet my adopted mother’s expectations and win her approval, would I have gone to Harvard? I think that this is one of those things that I will never truly know. Mind you, I was going to HGSE, which was not the same to my adopted mother because my degree was in a field that did not meet her approval. Finding what I believed was my life calling had trumped my attempt to meet my adopted mother’s expectation of my going into law or medicine.

Reflecting on these thoughts through the lens of authentic leader development, I began to question whether I was truly being authentic in my leadership role while at HGSE. Shamir and Eilam identify the main defining characteristic of authentic leaders as being themselves rather than conforming to others’ expectations (2005). So, if I was attending HGSE to meet the expectations of my adopted mother—even if they had become my own—was I being authentic when serving as the president of the graduate school’s Student Government Association (SGA)?

I served on the SGA solely out of my interest to serve the student body, although my wish to do so originated from my desire to be part of something more interesting than the academic program. Once I began my classes and experienced a letdown based on my expectations of Harvard, I wanted to be part of something more. In high school I had served as the secretary of the student council and liked it, so I decided to run for president of HGSE’s SGA. It granted me the possibility to ensure a positive experience for the entire student body. I was not certain whether I could win, but I put up posters and gave speeches in front of each of my classes. Speaking before people came naturally to me, so campaigning was not a problem.
When voted in as president, I knew that leading the group would be easy. The association was made up of leaders in their own right. Each member became a leader of a committee. It was my responsibility to provide the vision and goals for the year and to hold each member accountable for his/her role. I was confident that all of them would do their part and at a level acceptable to my high expectations. This confidence also made for an effective and successful year.

Reflecting upon why I had such confidence in my team, I realized that it was because each member was more than merely competent, driven, or accountable. When given a task, each member accomplished it to quality. When we had differences, we engaged in conversation until we came to an understanding. We supported each other to make sure that we were all successful. The entire team was invested in what we were doing. I would like to say that this was all due to my leadership, but the truth is, it had little to do with my leadership and everything to do with who we were as individuals. In hindsight, this was the only time in any of my leadership roles that I had this level of confidence in my team. As I continue to analyze my life-stories, I will continue to explore why this was the case.

Serving as president gave me access to a number of key figures within the graduate school as well as the college. It also gave me access to key student leaders from all the other graduate schools. This situation offered great opportunities for networking and making connections for the future, but I did not take advantage of it. I served as president to the best of my ability, making sure that we did everything we could to support our causes, impact the school for the greater good, and enhance student experience. The last thing on my mind was doing something that might benefit my
individual interests. My behavior in this case aligns with Shamir and Eilam’s claim that authentic leaders lead from a conviction. Of course back then I did not consider this.

As I think back on how I was then and how I continued to be as I moved on to a doctoral program, I sense a conflicting self-view of my confidence. I was aware of it, but it always lay slightly beneath my conscious level of thought. One of my greatest battles in life was rebuilding myself from the rubble after my cruel adopted mother got through shredding every remnant of my self worth. It was difficult for me to undo the damage by literally telling myself positives out loud as I looked at myself in the mirror only to rebut myself. Every morning and evening when it was time to brush my teeth, I would force myself to look in the mirror and say out loud: “I am somebody. I am special. I am worth it. I love me.” All the while, in my head I was reciting, “No I am not. I know I don’t believe it.” When I started, I actually did not believe it, but I kept doing it anyway until one day I no longer refuted my statements.

It took a very long time and well into my adulthood to build up the self worth that I hold now. Thus working with young teenagers who had lost their sense of self worth pained me. At times I would come home from work and sob at the sorrow I felt in my heart from feeling the pain in their hearts. This empathy made my confidence and conviction to serve our children, especially the disenfranchised and underrepresented, even stronger. This is where that part of my persona that “I know best” may have come from. I understood my students because of my life experiences, and because I understood them, I knew what was best for them. After all, I had figured out how to get myself out of my bad situation, thus, who better than me to guide them to a better life? I do not know why, but when it comes to serving our children, I am so confident that I know how
best to serve them that I think I may come across as arrogant. It is not that I think I am better than anyone; it is simply that I have proven to myself that I know what I am doing when it comes to serving our children.

While my confidence in this respect was unquestionable, there was another part of me that felt subordinate to the likes of those at Harvard and eventually at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education, where I entered the doctoral program. Who was I to think that I could network with anyone at Harvard or PENN, especially with professors? I was not worthy to do so. I found myself thinking this way when it came to relationships with my superiors as well. I understand that my professors and my supervisors have earned the respect that comes with their status, but so have I, and there is no need for me to feel unworthy of being recognized as having it. And yet I find myself reverting back to this subordinate role. When I think back on why, I realize that it has everything to do with how unworthy I was made to feel by my cruel adopted mother. Even though I have worked on rebuilding my self-worth for many years, it appears that it still needs some work. But there is something else as well.

Whenever I feel subordinate to my superiors or behave in a certain way in my leadership roles, something holds me back from what or how I am supposed to be—perhaps not “supposed” to be, but rather how I could or should be. I feel it and have pondered it in my mind before, but have never truly confronted it. As I continue to reflect on my life-stories, I will come back to this feeling and hopefully be able to put my finger on it.
VI. Chapter Six - Synthesis of Life-Stories Analyses

Having analyzed each life-story individually, I notice a number of recurring themes across stories. These themes speak to who I am and to my authenticity as a person, and how they have impacted my leadership. In order for me to further develop as an authentic person and authentic leader, I need to understand and acknowledge these themes. I need to understand their roots and whether they hinder or help my development as an authentic leader and my authentic leadership. I will thus synthesize my analyses of each life-story in order to dig deeper into each theme.

Flying Solo

I have always been a loner in both my personal and professional life. While I can be sociable and work with others, when it comes to doing things, I prefer to work on my own. This goes back to my early childhood in Korea, where I had to rely on myself for so much. Flying solo, I only had to count on myself and not worry about being let down by others. I also knew my expectations, and what I had to do to meet them. I did not have to worry about the possibility that others would not meet my expectations, an issue into which I will go into later, in another theme discussion. While there are times when I need to fly solo, more often than not it would be better for both my organization and for me were I not a loner.

This comes down to relationships. If I am not strategic in my relationships and with my co-workers, precisely what I am trying to avoid by being a loner is ultimately going to happen; people will let me down, and I will be unable to meet my expectations. This was what happened with my leadership opportunities at Castle Hill and Seaside.
High, two schools where I was the main leader. By flying solo, I did not properly gauge who were my allies and who were my opponents. In addition, since I did not build relationships, my followers did not get to know me or learn my story on why I did what I did. Although I was trying to be an authentic leader, I did not take the time to build authentic followers. A vital resource, relationships offer a network of people whom I can “call on, work with, and engage in addressing the issue at hand” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

When focusing on building relationships, I could have thought more politically. Heifetz and Linsky identify “six essential aspects of thinking politically in the exercise of leadership: one for dealing with people who are with you on the issue; one for managing those who are in opposition; and four for working with those who are uncommitted but wary—people you’re trying to move” (2002). In every leadership situation, I came across each of these types of people. While I preferred to work alone, there were times I did work with others, but these were mainly my partners or those whom I knew to be on my side. But even then it was sometimes difficult, because every partner relationship took time to build and came with the risk that the partner’s ideas might slow me down and make me compromise my own ideas. Had I had partners, they could have protected me from those working against me. As important as it is to have partners, it is just as important to know one’s opposition. "To survive and succeed in exercising leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters" (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002).

By keeping the opposition close, I would have gained a better sense of the resistance I was facing. Of course, what I tended to do was to deal only with the
opponents when and in whatever manner I had to. I did not view them as representatives of the team that had the most to lose or that disagree with my work. They actually needed more of my time and compassion. For example, at Castle Hill High I should have focused on my relationship with the most veteran assistant headmaster as well as the former union representative, who was one of the four teacher disciplinarians. By keeping these two opponents close to me, I could have gained a better perspective on the kinds of issues that the faculty members who were opposed to me were having. I would have learned that these two were leading the charge against me. Even after deciding to notify the teacher disciplinarians that their positions would be eliminated the following year, had I listened to my opposition, I could have mended the relationship by holding off on the decision. Holding off on my decision would not have compromised my sense of morality, which was what had driven me to make the decision in the first place. I could have still stayed true to myself because the teachers had already been warned about their positions. There was nothing stopping the same decision from being made later. Had I worked with the opposition, the teachers could have changed their agenda of trying to have me removed. We could also have come up with an alternate solution with the same results, but one that was more acceptable to the entire team.

The team also consisted of those undecided members who were neither my partners nor my opponents. This is where Heifetz and Linsky’s four aspects of thinking politically come into play. This is also where I feel that flying solo is less damaging and areas in which I do well. In my leadership roles, I was usually new to my circumstances, yet as I uncovered issues, I approached them and accepted responsibility for them as if I had helped create them. For those issues in whose creation I did play a role, I definitely
accepted responsibility. For example, when student scheduling at Seaside High School did not go as smoothly as desired, I took ownership without pointing out all the other factors that had made the process far too complicated despite the fact that a number of factors, such as the ineffective application of the student management system, had contributed to the situation. By doing this, I generated less criticism than if I had blamed everyone and everything else.

In addition to taking responsibility for the issues at hand, it is also important to acknowledge the loss of a school community. Usually changes are accompanied by gains and losses. Although gains are usually easier to accept, losses are often far more difficult to deal with. At Seaside High the losses seemed overwhelming. Not only was the school literally losing its most beloved colleagues and leaders, the faculty and community had to contend with their own beliefs about their school. They still believed that their school was doing well and had a great team. Then a new superintendent arrived and informed them that the state had determined that their school was underperforming. This was not only a loss to bear but one that also demanded many changes and adaptations.

As much work as there was to be done to improve instruction and student performance, I did try to take the time to assist the faculty in dealing with their loss. I did work on building a relationship with the teachers to show them that I understood their experience and that together we could make it through. I also modeled the behaviors required by the changes and losses. One of the greatest losses that the teachers faced was time. In previous years, they had had time during the day to prepare their lessons (if they prepared at all), correct their papers, and do other things. Now they were being asked to work most of the day and to do most of the planning and correcting of papers after school.
hours. Teachers were required to work much harder and more than they were used to.

But every teacher who came in early or left late, saw me also working early and late. If they drove by the school on weekends, they saw me working at the school. My modeling helped teachers understand why they too had to work harder. It helped us feel more like a team.

Unfortunately, modeling behaviors and acknowledging the loss were not enough. Even accepting casualties as a necessary part of the turnaround plan was not enough to allow me to survive in my leadership position. Part of this was due to my not managing and thinking politically about my relationships with key leaders—the two principals, three assistant principals, and the chief of teaching and learning. I assumed all of these leaders were my partners; that was a key mistake on my part. I should have known better than to think that simply because they were leaders who had been charged with accomplishing the same goals as I had been, they were automatically my partners. I did not take into consideration that the two principals may have had different agendas. I did not consider the assistant principals’ desire for a sense of importance. I was blind-sided by the chief of teaching and learning, who kept me close as her opponent while I mistakenly viewed her as my ally. If I had focused on strategic relationship building and thinking politically about the people with whom I had to work with instead of feeling that I had to do everything on my own, the outcome of my tenure might have been very different.

It is often said that working at the top is a lonely job. At times it can be, but for the most part it does not have to be. Heifetz and Linsky state:
The lone warrior myth of leadership is a sure route to heroic suicide. Though you may feel alone at times with either creative ideas or the burden of final decision-making authority, psychological attachments to operating solo will get you into trouble. You need partners. Nobody is smart enough or fast enough to engage alone the political complexity of an organization or community when it is facing and reacting to adaptive pressures (2002).

In terms of authentic leadership, “Relationships are the bridges that connect authenticity to influence and value creation…. While leaders may lead by virtue of who they are, leaders also create value by virtue of their relationships” (Cashman, 2008). I was functioning under the self-limiting illusion, as Cashman (2008) would call it, of thinking that I was the one who made things happen, that I was the source of accomplishment at my schools. To think that others could make things happen and be a source of success would require me to trust in their abilities. This leads me to the next theme that has emerged from these life-stories analyses.

_Trust or Lack Thereof_

Not to sound redundant, but based on my childhood experiences, I have generally learned not to trust others. Over the years, I have learned to trust certain people on certain things up to a point, especially in my personal life, but even less so in my professional life. It is not that I start out by distrusting them but rather, I become dubious over the course of time and based on my experience. When meeting colleagues, I immediately try to discern whether his/her “behavior reflects appropriately on their moral obligations to educate children well” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). If I sense that their
motives and commitment are not directed at the best interest of the children, I do not trust and lose respect for them. James Lytle rephrases Bryk and Schneider’s definition of relational trust as one “built through respectful exchanges with others, personal regard and commitment, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity” (Lytle, 2010). I struggle with many of these components of relational trust.

Based on my life-stories analyses, I seem to act like a know-it-all in the belief that I have all the answers and others necessarily do not. This is not a conscious decision, but regardless of intent my actions must come across in this way. And my belief that I do know best automatically reduces the status of others’ knowledge. Adding to this, I recognize my colleagues’ weaknesses and vulnerabilities and immediately lose respect for them due to their incompetence. At least that is how I perceive it. Such an attitude absolutely does not allow for respectful exchanges. Also, based on my perspective of their incompetence, I often do not allow my colleagues to assume the responsibilities of their roles. As the leader, I do not create opportunities that would allow a relational trust even to start.

Creating an environment supportive of relational trust means risking failure. Sometimes it is through failure that trust can be built. Trust may come from allowing people and me to make mistakes and being there to support each other through learning and to improve without passing negative judgment. Without trust, people tend not to take risks. Winston Churchill once said, “Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm” (Cashman, 2008). The difficulty lies in prioritizing and taking the time to build relational trust as one is constantly mandated to do more in an ever less amount of time and while everyone is watching. This is where the approach to work has to be
sufficiently strategic to allow the process of doing work create opportunities for relational trust and relationship building.

Technical Problems vs. Adaptive Challenges

My approach to work did not help my relationship or my relational trust building, especially with my leadership teams. Each of my life-stories included both technical problems and adaptive challenges, but at the time I was not aware of the difference between them. I did know that differences exist; I simply was not aware of the impact that the solution to each has on leadership. Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky identified technical problems as those having known solutions and adaptive challenges as those that require a change in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties (2009). Of course, it is more complicated than that and simply because something is a technical problem does not mean that it is not complex or critically important. It also does not mean that every problem and challenge comes neatly packaged as one or the other. But it is important for a leader to be able to differentiate between the two in order to approach the problem or challenge appropriately and strategically.

One of my strengths is my ability to identify technical problems and find solutions rather quickly. While this ability can be a positive one, the way I have managed it at times has worked to my disadvantage. For instance, at Castle Hill High I immediately identified a staffing and budget issue. This school of over twelve hundred students only had one world language teacher. There was no way that students could meet their graduation requirements under these circumstances. By changing the teacher disciplinary position to the community field coordinator position for half the cost, I could
obtain two more world language teachers and four disciplinarians. This made sense, and I, as the authority figure, could take care of the matter in the way that I handled most technical problems. However, in my decision I did not take into consideration the adaptive challenge involved. The teacher disciplinarians were not merely positions; they were people—people who were vested in the position and in the roles that they played. They held certain beliefs about the importance of their positions. I did not take into consideration the impact of this when I applied a technical solution.

The impact of these types of decisions and actions ruined my credibility with my teams. My perception is that I tend to think much faster than the others on the team do and thus share solutions before they are ready for them. By doing so, I also tend to emit too much aggressive self-assurance. Nobody likes a know-it-all. “The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems” (Heifetz et al., 2009). Just because a problem may have a technical solution does not mean that it is not an adaptive challenge. My experience at Castle Hill did make me more aware of approaching challenges at Seaside High. The issue I created at SHS made me focus too much on those technical problems that should have been taken care of by other members of my team as part of their role responsibilities. Allowing my team members to bear responsibility for their roles would have promoted trust and relationship building. It would also have allowed me to focus more on the adaptive challenges that the entire school community was facing.

It was not only we in the school who were feeling the pressure of the adaptive challenges; the superintendent felt it too. It should be noted here that there were a number of circumstances at SHS that set me up for failure right from the start and that I
had overlooked before taking the job. That said, there were still some things I could have done to make things work better than they did. Circumstances at SHS called for a number of technical solutions that we, the authority at the school level, should have been able to resolve. As noted, I should have managed this better. But with some of the adaptive challenges, I tried to do the right thing. As much as the superintendent accused me of not getting on the balcony, in hindsight I would say that it was she who needed to get on the balcony.

Heifetz and Linsky describe the skill of being able to step back while in the midst of an action in order to determine what is really going on as “getting on the balcony”, more specifically as “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony” (2002). Even though I solved as many technical problems as I could by myself (I had lost faith that my leadership team could handle responsibilities according to my standard), I did take time out to assess where my faculty was at and to really listen to what team members were saying through every word and action. Some of this I did at the direction of the superintendent. These actions amount to two of the four tasks recommended by Heifetz and Linsky for getting beyond blind spots, the first being able to distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges.

As I was trying to address the needs of my faculty, my demands were countered by the demands of the superintendent. The faculty had to adjust their practices to some of the technical solutions mandated by the turnaround plan. There was nothing we could do about this, and the teachers acknowledged this. But there were ways in which I tried to support them. For instance, teachers had to transition out of a workday schedule that had allowed them to correct papers, plan, and do anything else they needed to do before
leaving the school for the day. This had meant that once they got home either right after work or after their coaching responsibilities, the rest of the time had been theirs and their families. Once things changed, teachers were required to use their time during the day for professional development. This meant that teachers now had to take home hours of work. Thus when planning professional development for teachers, the teaching and learning team incorporated opportunities for including prep and planning, which alleviated some of the work that they were bringing home with them. This did not meet with the superintendent’s approval. Soon afterwards we had to begin scripting every professional development lesson-plan word-for-word a week in advance for approval. This resulted in over 50 professional development plans a week, not including adaptations based on previous sessions.

While we were mandated to add this additional workload to our schedules, I was being reprimanded and asked what I was doing with all my time. Obviously I was busy with my team scripting out professional development plans because there were too many of them and the team needed my help. The superintendent was not happy because she did not see the degree of change that she was looking for at the rate that she wanted to see it happen. She wanted to see changes in the way teachers were teaching overnight. Although a technical solution could have been applied here, I knew that it was an adaptive challenge and was going to take a longer time to resolve. It definitely was not going to happen overnight, as the superintendent wished. This is where I should have read the clues offered by my authority figure better (the fourth task for avoiding blind spots). Had I focused on the superintendent’s words and behaviors differently, from the balcony, I could have gotten a better sense of the impact of my actions on the
organization as a whole. Knowing this, I should have prioritized a communications strategy to address some of the organization’s concerns. So though the desired results would not have been immediate, the organization could have seen the steps being taken and the incremental progress being made toward these desired changes. “Sustaining your leadership, then, requires first and foremost the capacity to see what is happening to you and your initiative, as it is happening” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Some Positives

Before moving on, I must acknowledge another theme that does thread through my life-stories. In spite of my weaknesses, I do have strengths. There is no question of my dedication, love, and respect for my students and all children in general. I went into education for the sole purpose of serving our children and advocating for their welfare. At every school, I made decisions based on what I believed were in the best interest of students, even if doing so meant fallout for me. I have a deep passion for what I do. Those who acknowledged this passion most were my students. Although I have struggled with my relationships with adults throughout my career, my relationships with students have always been strong and come naturally. If anyone accepted me as being authentic, it was my students. This makes sense since I always took time to listen to their life-stories and to share bits of mine in return. Most importantly, the students knew that I respected them. For students, especially our urban students, that had to come before they respected me. I shared my belief in my students and I held them to high expectations. I treated them as if they were important people that mattered, because they do. Students know when we are being genuine. I went above and beyond for them and they felt it. I
lived, taught, and led, believing that my sole purpose in life was to serve our children. And my students experienced the truth of that.

Another strength is my reliability. If there is something that needs to be done, I get it done. This, of course, holds true in situations where I am also given the autonomy to do what must get done. My outlook is that all things are possible; if something appears impossible, I think out of the box and find a solution. Regardless of the outcome, I made positive changes in every school where I worked as a teacher or administrator by developing programs and improving existing programs, all for the betterment of our students and teachers. Those problems that people refused to confront, I confronted head on, and usually found a way to solve them. This took some courage on my part, but now I believe I did these things more out of naïveté. I was naïve in believing that everyone’s understanding of the purpose of public education was to provide all our children with the highest quality of teaching and learning in a fair and equitable manner. I functioned under the belief that everyone in education should have the best interest of our children in mind. Based on this premise, I worked hard to be reliable; if this took courage then I am grateful that I had the strength to persevere.

This leads to another strength. In spite of all the challenges that came my way because I chose to take problems head on, I kept going. There were times when I felt defeated by the public education system, but I remained resilient. This did not come without a cost. Over the years my naïveté has gotten somewhat tainted as I have come to realize that not everyone in education or American society has the best interest of our children or their education in mind. But this does not mean that I am going to give up on my ideals or beliefs on what we should be doing for our children. It merely means that I
have to become more savvy and strategic in my actions, which include becoming a more
effective authentic leader.

In summary, this analysis of my selected life-stories has revealed three major
themes, with other related ones under each of these, as well as some strengths. Each
theme is related to the others. When all of these were connected, I gained a different
perspective on my leadership. I had been aware of these themes before, but it was
different once I had explicitly acknowledged them. It is never easy admitting one’s
deficiencies, especially when one has worked so hard to do one’s best to be one’s best. I
always believed that I was true to myself, that I was an authentic person and authentic
leader. Throughout this study, I have come to realize that the problem was not that I was
not authentic, but that I was authentic to the person who I was at that moment and time.
During all the time that I thought that I was a leader, I now think that I was more of a
manager. Sure, there were plenty of times when I served as a leader, but overall I would
now have to say that I was merely managing. In *Working For Kids: Education
Leadership as Inquiry and Invention*, James H. Lytle describes how he did not become an
effective school leader until his second principalship. He spent the time until then
learning how to lead. During his second principalship, he came to understand how to
lead for learning. This “meant developing a clear understanding of the strengths and
limitations of the school; encouraging risk, inquiry and entrepreneurship on the part of
the faculty; and supporting the faculty as the school developed its human, social, and
organizational capital, and in doing so improving opportunities to learn for its students”
(Lytle, 2010). For me, the key takeaway in this statement lies in his way of providing
vision, guidance, and support for his followers so that they may attain success and thus
allow him to do so as well. He personally did not do everything by himself; his followers overcame the adaptive challenges through his leadership. He would not have succeeded without relationships with partners and opponents. He definitely did not do it without thinking politically and creating relational trust. And to do this he had to know how to tackle technical and adaptive challenges appropriately. I feel that analyzing my life-stories has been the first step towards learning to lead for learning. So despite my strengths and because of my weaknesses, I had not yet learned how to secure a lasting opportunity for leadership, which would allow my strengths to shine.

Proto-Stories

After applying the narrative method and analyzing my life-stories through three lenses—individual descriptions of life-stories, their explanation, an interpretation of the actions and events in them—I have concluded that they all fall under one proto-story or development theme. Initially I thought my life-stories would connect to several proto-stories, but after analyzing my seven life-stories, there was one in particular that seemed a strong match.

For most of my American life, I have felt that I was meant for greatness. I was never sure exactly what type of greatness, or why I believed this. It was merely a feeling that I had, and it was only during this time-out in my life that I lost the feeling. It was also due to this feeling that I thought my leadership development would fall under the theme of leadership development as a natural process. After all, I had been unique and gifted from an early age. Such leaders feel at an early age that they are ‘special’ and this serves as proof of their ability to lead. It was never obvious to me that I was going to be
a leader in any area of my life. I simply knew that whatever I did I was going to do to my best and highest possible level.

Next, I thought my leadership development theme would fall under *self-improvement through learning*, as I am always analyzing and learning from my life experiences. A key component of this proto-story, however, is learning from a role model. I never really had a role model from whom I could learn how to be a leader. In the past seventeen years, I have known no school leader, who, like James H. Lytle (2010), shared life-stories. Reading his life-stories I was able to learn how he had embodied the authentic leader. As I continue my leadership development, I look forward to building role-model relationships and developing under this proto-story type. But up until this point, my development has not fallen under this theme.

Although I am dedicated to the cause of improving education and creating access to it for our children with the greatest needs, I cannot say that my *leadership development is out of finding a cause*. What I can say, however, is that my leadership development emerged from struggle. This explains why I prefer to work alone and have difficulty building relationships and trust. But it also explains some of the other aspects of who I am and where my values and convictions originated. My struggle lay in my childhood—being given up for adoption, being raised by a cruel adopted mother, becoming part of the social services system, and experiencing homelessness. A list such as this may make a reader want to pity me. But it was also through this struggle that I learned to be alone, self-sufficient, and independent. Eventually I learned to believe in myself and that I could overcome any obstacle. I found a spirit to fight and built a resiliency that could get me through any struggle. *Development through struggle* made me strong willed, self-
confident, proactive, tough, and capable of tackling any challenge. All the same, I believe that I was born with some of these qualities. I remember that as a child in Korea I was strong-willed and stubborn, long before experiencing any struggles or hardships.

These are great leadership qualities if applied effectively. As became apparent from the analyses of my life-stories, instead of applying these qualities to support my success as a leader, I did the opposite. That said, it is one thing to be able to associate my leadership development with a proto-story and another to say that doing this makes me a better leader. As I compared the events in my life-stories to the conceptual framework outlined by Gardner et al., it became clear to me where the authentic leader and follower development broke down.

**Modified Conceptual Framework**

My antecedents as an authentic leader are clear, but the framework does not demand that both the leader and the follower be able to share their personal history or trigger events. In the life-stories approach to authentic leader development, it is paramount that followers learn the leader’s life-stories so that they can assess the stories and find explanations of and justifications for the leader’s authenticity. The telling of life-stories is vital to building relationships and trust. In all my life-stories, I never took the time to find ways to share my life-stories, and therefore never really built relationships with my followers. They too did not share their life-stories with me. That added to the lack of relational trust between us, especially as I did not believe that the followers’ intentions were aimed at the good of our children.
Next comes the organizational climate. We cannot assume that the climate in which we work is inclusive, ethical, caring, or strength-based. Although it is the leader’s responsibility to create such an environment, it is difficult for him/her to do so when working within a larger organization that does not share these same values. It is probably a little easier to try and create such a climate in a larger district because the leaders above one, on the district level, only step in when there are issues. The challenge lies in getting their support when things are not going well, as happened at Castle Hill. In a district with only one high school and a superintendent who micromanages, cultivating an environment such as this can be difficult unless the vision of the organizational climate is aligned in action and not simply words. This was my experience at Seaside High.

In addition to the factors beyond the leader, the framework also broke down at the Self-Regulation level partly due to the limitations of the Self-Awareness factor. Self-awareness is an integral component of an authentic leader. But my self-awareness of my values, identity, emotions, and motives had me working solo, not trusting others, and not building the relationships necessary for developing authentic followership. Even if I was self-regulating, I was doing so in the confinement of my own self. The behaviors that came of this did not consist of positive modeling. Nothing in this framework permits followers or an external entity to check and make sure that a leader is embodying his/her authenticity in the right way. If the authentic leader does not develop, then he or she cannot have authentic followers.

A few modifications in Gardner et al.’s conceptual framework could introduce additional factors that would provide some check and balance to ensure that development is proceeding authentically. First, the sharing of life-stories is integral to building an
authentic leader-follower relationship. Second, there needs to be a way for followers to verify the authenticity of the leader. It is also important for the leader to receive confirmation of the job he is doing. All the same, there should be differences and there need to be opportunities for negotiating between the leader and followers.

With regards to the leader’s development, it is necessary to introduce regular, purposeful time-outs that grant him or her periods for reflection, adaptation, and growth as a person and a leader. A key factor here is that the leader should not spend this time-out alone. An external person or information is crucial for promoting new perspectives. It pushes the leader to dig deeper for meanings to draw from the reflection. This external component ensures objectivity, discussion, and support. During this scheduled time-out, it is also important for the leader to get on the balcony and assess what is actually going on. During this process, it is important to look beyond the organization and to include the leader’s supervisor(s). In this way, the leader can also get a sense of what is going on with stakeholders who have a more direct impact on the supervisor(s).

It is necessary always to bear in mind that in order for a successful authentic organization to grow, entities at large, including supervisors and the community, must have an influence on the overall health of authentic leader-follower development. This is why the leader must include upper management during the Reflect/Adapt/Grow stage of the framework. As important as it is for a leader to take time-outs, it is equally important for followers to do so. More often than not, followers function with limited information and a limited perspective of the whole. If followers are included in opportunities to go on the balcony and play a role in creating an authentic organization, then the leader is not left to create it on her/his own. In this way, more opportunities for collaboration and the
ownership of decisions are created. Figure 2 shows a modified conceptual framework that incorporates these new components within Gardner et al.’s framework. It is worth noting that Gardner et al. did not include the life-stories approach to authentic leader development when creating their framework. This modified framework, however, demonstrates how the life-stories approach can be incorporated. The key point here is to consciously create times and opportunities for sharing and verifying the authenticity of life-stories. Shamir and Eilam focus on the leader sharing her or his life-stories but this framework also includes the followers sharing their life-stories. Such exchange allows the leader to get to know the followers more intimately, and thus supports the development of a more trusting relationship. It also allows the organization to look at life-stories that are pertinent to it and to look for meanings that can help it grow in an authentic way.
Fig. 2. Modified conceptual framework incorporating the life-stories approach.
VII. Chapter Seven - Conclusion

The Process

It began simply enough, with a mentor/facilitator creating two lifelines, one for my personal life and one for my professional life. It was not difficult to identify the events that I would turn into my life-stories. In order to avoid analysis while writing the stories, I simply wrote them down as though I was retelling the event from my perspective at the time of their occurrence. I consciously stopped myself from doing anything more than recollecting events and key players. I felt that it was important not to cloud the past with my current interpretations. This way the analysis could be directed purely at the past event, not at the past event with present interjections. This turned out to be more important than I realized when it came to analyzing the life-stories.

The analysis process began as it had every other time I had reflected on these events and tried to figure out what had happened and what had gone wrong. Many of those times were stressful and frustrating moments in my life, or times of pain. It is difficult to analyze objectively when influenced by emotion. This time I was not as emotional, at least not in the damaged sense. I was inquisitive. I was now looking through the lens of a developing authentic leader who was curious about the meanings I would take away from the life-stories analyses. At first I came up with the same meanings that I always had. There was usually some decision I had made without thinking through all its possible outcomes. Then there were all the people who were inadequate, under qualified, did not care about students, or just downright cruel. While my decisions may not have been popular with everyone, they were the right decisions to make. It was always everyone else who had the problems. This was my usual conclusion
in my prior analyses of the selected life-stories. Mind you, I did take responsibility for
the role I played in each scenario, but the basis was still that I had been right and they
wrong.

The possibility of obtaining the same results as before concerned me. Was this
the meaning that I was supposed to take away from my life-stories? If not, how could I
know? One thing that I did know did not work was trying to force myself to conduct the
analyses on a timeline to meet a deadline. So I stepped back and let the process set the
timeline. As I continued to reflect on each story, I pushed myself to look deeper into my
being. My prior conclusions had been based on a superficial layer around myself, a
protective shield that prevented me from caving in after each attack in life and
circumstances. To draw meanings from my life-stories, I knew I had to dig deep. I had
to expose my vulnerabilities, out loud and in writing, and look truthfully at the self I had
become. This was no easy feat.

So here I found myself again, alone and trying to figure things out. At the same
time, it was difficult to involve anyone else because this is truly a process that one has to
undergo alone. No one else knows the truth inside us better than we do. This did not
mean, however, that I could not have external information to push my thinking or open
new perspectives. On the contrary, it is imperative that we have an external influence to
push us to think differently than we have in the past. This is when I researched other
sources and found a book by Kevin Cashman. Cashman was one of the first pioneers to
push for a values-based leadership style. His book, Leadership from the Inside Out,
“guides you through a reflective journey to grow as a whole person in order to grow as a
whole leader” (2008). “[Leadership] comes from a deeper reality within us; it comes
from our values, principles, life experiences, and essence. Leadership is a process, an intimate expression of who we are” (Cashman, 2008). This is directly related to the premise of authentic leader development through life-stories. Leaders’ stories provide them with knowledge and clarity about their values and convictions. Life-stories not only provide self-knowledge and self-concept clarity, but they also justify who we are, identify why we are here and also explain how and why we became leaders (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Cashman’s journey is a process that takes time, and I thus worked through the first part, which helped me with the analyses of my life-stories. (I will continue working through the journey.) To dig deeper I had to uncover my personal beliefs, but more importantly, I had to identify my shadow beliefs. In his years of coaching people, Cashman identified two distinct types of beliefs—conscious beliefs and shadow beliefs. Conscious beliefs are the ones we know about and can articulate fairly easily, even if that requires some thought. “Shadow Beliefs are those beliefs that are manifestations of hidden, unexplored, or unresolved psychological dynamics” (Cashman, 2008). Based on my personal lifeline, I think it is safe to say that I may have some unresolved psychological dynamics. In the big picture, I feel as though I have worked through many of them, but at the same time, I believe I do have some shadow beliefs that stem from my childhood. As I analyzed my life-stories, it was my shadow beliefs that I really had to search as I tried to grasp the meanings underlying each story. This was the hard and most impactful part of the analysis process, and a part that would not have occurred had it not been for the external influence.
Once I opened myself up to my shadow beliefs, I found that I was easily able to pinpoint weaknesses and mistakes that differed from those I had uncovered through prior analyses. I also focused on all the negatives until my facilitator reminded me that there were some positive attributes as well. This clarified several points. First, that I need to work more on teasing out my shadow beliefs, and second, that a mentor, facilitator or coach is important and necessary to leadership development.

Even after acknowledging my shadow beliefs, I could not get at the full meanings that I was supposed to take away from my life-stories. Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, and Adler (2005) point out the importance of life-stories, not in terms of the facts, but in the meanings that leaders take away from these life experiences. It was the work of Heifetz and Linsky and Lytle that really helped me identify the meanings in my life-stories. Leadership on the Line (2002) gave me the terminology for my circumstances and behaviors. Working For Kids (2010) shared another leader’s life-stories and put the embodiment of authentic leadership in context. Although Shamir and Eilam (2005) define authentic leaders and the role of life-stories in the development of authentic leaders, I would interject that if the meanings taken away from these life-stories are the key to this development, then the critical components are the external resources that push the leader to realizing the meanings in his/her life-stories.

In Closing

Having gone through the process as outlined by Shamir and Eilam—by creating personal and professional lifelines, identifying key events in them, writing a life-story for
each, and finally analyzing them, I was able to take away meanings that showed where I have been and how that influenced who I currently am, both personally and professionally. With this new self-concept of clarity and self-knowledge, I can draw on these meanings to continue developing into a more effective authentic leader.

In addition to taking away informative and helpful meanings from my life-stories that have helped me better understand what had happened to me professionally, I realized a poignant point. Unless the leader enacts a systematic mechanism or process to focus on her/his own personal development continuously and creates a check and balance for the values and beliefs that he/she embodies, his/her leadership development and practices can be based on totally inaccurate or misleading premises. Cashman states that, “While we are always authentic to our current state of development, we are inauthentic to our potential state of development” (2008). Authentic leader development needs to be ongoing as we have an infinite ability to grow and improve.

Based on the characteristics and attributes of authentic leaders as outlined by Shamir and Eilam, I did consider myself an authentic leader. But after analyzing my life-stories, I discovered that my shadow beliefs—the outcomes of which I believe were based on my being authentic—had led to a lack of authentic followership. Without followership, there is no leadership. It was only by taking this “time out” to invest time in myself and take an in-depth look at who I am and where I have come from, that will I become better informed on how to choose who I want to continue to be, as I further my authentic leader development.

Although this “time out” was triggered by events in my last leadership role, it was the doctoral program at Penn and this dissertation that granted me the opportunity to
reflect on my leadership development. At the beginning of the program, I still struggled to feel worthy enough to address my professors with a level of certain confidence. Unlike their colleagues at Harvard, the professors at Penn were far more approachable and partners in our learning. This helped me in my struggle to complete the program. Timely completion requires a laser-like focus in a program such as the Mid-Career Doctoral Program. In hindsight, I did not have this focus; I approached my studies with an interest to broaden my knowledge base and strengthen my weaker areas. I would also say that at the time I was not ready for the level of leadership development that I went through during this dissertation process. As Shamir and Eilam (2005) point out, developing through life-stories is a highly personal process that has to take place naturally in order for it to be authentic. For me, this has meant a much longer timeline for completing my doctorate, though I can say that the process morphed naturally and provided me with quite an authentic experience. I also feel that through this authentic experience I have gained a mentor, joined a support network, and realized a life dream. It has been a costly experience, but one I do not regret. Thanks to this dissertation and my experience at Penn, I have learned more about who I am, where I come from, and how I will continue to develop as an authentic person and a more effective authentic leader.

Authentic leadership is a new construct of leadership still in the process of development and we have been cautioned against developing authentic leaders until strategies for authentic leadership are developed (Cooper et al., 2005). Yet if authentic leadership is the root concept underlying all positive approaches to leadership and its development (May et al., 2003), then to develop as an authentic person and leader is to develop any leadership style.
Final Thought

Everyone’s life-stories will be different. Some will be more dramatic, traumatic or ordinary, but none less relevant than another. As we continue to live our lives and experience life, we will continue to generate life-stories. We may even draw different meanings from them than the ones we found in earlier life-stories analyses. The key is that we are evolving beings, hence evolving leaders. It is our responsibility to take time to continue to learn and adapt as we live. I still believe that I have a higher purpose and that I was given the talents and abilities to do my part in making humanity better. As I continue to find my way in the world, I will need to let go of the past and the hurt so that it no longer has a negative influence on how I live and lead. This means finding a way to do this while staying true to who I am, my values, ethics, and morals—my authentic self.
Appendix A: Gardner et al.’s Propositions

1. Critical elements from the personal history of authentic leaders, including influential persons who model authenticity and pivotal trigger events, serve as positive forces in developing leader self-awareness.

2. More as opposed to less authentic leaders possess higher levels of self-awareness, including self-clarity and self-certainty.

3. More as opposed to less authentic leaders are more aware of, and committed to, their core end values.

4a. More as opposed to less authentic leaders are more likely to possess trustworthiness, integrity, credibility, respect for others, fairness, and accountability as core personal identity images.

4b. At the interpersonal level of identity, authentic leaders will incorporate the role of leader into their identity and come to see themselves as positive models for others.

4c. To the extent that trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, credibility, respect for others, fairness, and accountability represent core values that are shared by members of a collective (e.g. group or organization), the prototypical member(s) who best exemplifies these attributes will be viewed as socially attractive and disproportionately influential, and hence develop an identity as an authentic leader within the collective.

5. More as opposed to less authentic leaders possess higher levels of emotional intelligence.

6. More authentic leaders are primarily motivated by self-verification and self-improvement goals, whereas less authentic leaders are primarily driven by ego defense motives to pursue self-enhancement and self-protection objectives.

7. More as opposed to less authentic leaders achieve greater congruence between their actual and ideal selves, resulting in more positive emotions and well-being.

8. As authentic leaders gain self-knowledge and awareness, they achieve self-concordant identities as their decisions and actions become
increasingly self-determined and consonant with their internalized values and goals.

9. More as opposed to less authentic leaders engage in more balanced processing of self-relevant and other information to arrive at more accurate perceptions of themselves and others.

10a. To be authentic, a leader’s behavior must be consistent with felt, and espoused, end values, identities and beliefs.

10b. Leader self-awareness and balanced processing are positively related to behavioral authenticity.

11. As leader self-awareness and self-acceptance increases, leaders become more transparent in communicating their values, identity, emotions, goals and motives to others.

12. Authentic leaders serve as positive models for followers by displaying through their words and actions core values, positive emotions, motives, and goals and a concern for followers’ growth and development.

13. Follower exposure to an authentic leader can serve as a trigger event that heightens self-awareness and initiates a path towards self-development and authentic followership.

14. For associates with high self-concept clarity, high congruence between their values and those of the leader will cause the to identify with and emulate the leader; in cases of low valued congruence, identification with and emulation of the leader will be low.

15a. Followers with low as opposed to high self-concept clarity are more likely to personally identify with and display dependence on the leader as they adopt the leader’s end values, beliefs and goals as their own.

15b. Authentic leaders will seek to develop followers with low self-concept clarity by modeling self-discovery processes, shifting them away from personal identification with and dependence on the leader to identification with the collective and autonomy, and ultimately, internalization of the core values and mission of the collective.

16. By modeling self-awareness, making self-transcendence motives salient, and focusing followers’ attention on desired possible selves, authentic leaders activate self-verifying motives among followers, causing them to seek out accurate feedback to facilitate personal growth and development.
17a. Authentic leader-follower relationships are most likely to emerge when high congruence with respect to the leader’s and followers’ actual, ought and ideal selves exists, contributing to high levels of trust, intimacy, cooperation and alignment of goals.

17b. In unconstrained organizational contexts where members view authenticity as a quality of their ideal selves, the most authentic members will assume the role of leader, with followers working in cooperation with the leader to achieve shared goals, including a positive ethical climate.

17c. Authentic leaders can foster authentic and self-concordant identities for followers by providing them with opportunities for self-determination, and thereby enable them to fulfill their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

18a. Through honest assessments of personal, associate and organizational assets, authentic leaders build reserves of relational trust that they are able to tap during difficult times to foster resilience for themselves and followers.

18b. Followers of more as opposed to less authentic leaders will have higher levels of trust and relational and development trust in particular, in their leaders.

19a. Followers of more as opposed to less authentic leaders will experience higher levels of engagement.

19b. Authentic leaders facilitate the experience of engagement among followers by helping them discover their talents, fitting them with an appropriate position, providing enriched work, and the opportunity to develop rewarding co-worker relations.

19c. Employee engagement contributes to elevated levels of veritable and sustainable follower performance.

20a. Followers of more as opposed to less authentic leaders will experience higher levels of workplace well-being.

20b. Employee engagement arising from authentic follower behavior will promote increases in workplace well-being among followers.

20c. Workplace well-being contributes to elevated levels of veritable and sustainable follower performance.
21. More as opposed to less authentic leaders will create “proximal” organizational climates that are more inclusive, caring, engaged, and oriented towards developing strengths.
Bibliography


