

FOREWORD

This book unexpectedly brought me back to a much earlier time in my career, to a place far removed from the urban Michigan school detailed within its pages. I was a young education professor based in Fairbanks, visiting schools in isolated rural villages in the vast expanses of Alaska. Each school served one small village of a few hundred Native Alaskan residents, with a K–12 population of about sixty or fewer students. The teachers at most schools were white, from “the Lower 48,” as were the principals. In each village, the school staff were typically housed in a compound separate from the village residents, and seldom participated in the daily life of the students and their community.

Little of the students’ vibrant cultural life was reflected in the schools—not the people they encountered, the curriculum they studied, the interactional patterns they experienced, or even the language they were expected to speak. Not only were the school staff not versed in the children’s culture, but they also saw the students’ culture as problematic to their success in school.

Once when a principal was talking to me about his school’s poor academic performance, his explanations centered around his struggle to help the teachers learn to keep the students on the right path, especially when they went back to homes that undid everything the school was trying to accomplish. Originally from a state far from rural Alaska, he likened himself to a military general working in a foreign land. Suddenly, it all made sense to me. He was the general, the teachers were the officers, the students were the troops in training . . . and the community? The community was the enemy.

I think most observers would intuitively realize that an institution that fashioned itself as the enemy of one's community, one's family, and all that one holds dear could not successfully peddle its academic wares to those who were unwillingly drafted into its confines for seven hours a day, five days a week. And yet, the non-Alaska Native principals and teachers continued to assert that the reason the children weren't learning had nothing to do with what the educators were or were not doing, but could be completely explained by the fact that the *communities* did not support the *schools*.

While it's perhaps not as starkly obvious as in rural Alaska, I have regularly encountered the same perspective in many urban schools in the mainland United States. The schools, the teachers, and the principals say that the children are unmotivated; that no matter what the educators do in schools, the children return to dysfunctional, uncaring, crime-ridden, single-parent homes and communities. In other words, the troops cannot be trained properly because they insist on fraternizing with the enemy.

This volume offers a completely different paradigm. What if educational leaders could learn to embrace students' lived realities as part of their schooling, rather than insist that to succeed in school they must abandon everything that has nurtured and supported them thus far in their life journeys? What if the school could not only embrace the community, but seek to work with students, parents, and others to make use of community resources for instructional purposes, and design school curricula to collectively address long-standing community problems? What if the school, the students, and the community were on the same side?

If we are to convince more students in our country's urban schools to embrace the education offered at these institutions, then we have to help school leaders learn to stop blaming the students and the communities, and start changing the institutions. This book, through an ethnographic study of one school and one enlightened,

self-reflective school leader, Joe, provides a road map to accomplish that goal. Within its pages, school leaders can learn to break through the confines of their traditional principal training paradigms, and leap into a brave new world of providing real education for *all* students. They can learn how to develop culturally responsive teachers and instruction; create physically and emotionally safe spaces for students who have been treated poorly in school settings; fight racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic policies; and connect with parents and communities in new and mutually beneficial ways. The success of our urban schools depends on how quickly that knowledge can be made available to and adopted by a much wider audience.

It's time.

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