

Let the Symbols Speak

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Abstract: This article purposed to explore how superintendents in still democracy and democratic values in American public schools. This qualitative case study employed autoethnography as a research methodology to better understand in what ways the efficacy and praxis of the superintendents of independent public schools as founding members of the Public Education Visioning Institute of Texas had been influenced by their participation. Study findings resulted in an iconic unity of values, vision, and passion for change among the superintendents to improve not only their schools, but also all public schools. The implications of the study confirmed the need for further development of the Visioning Institute as a moral imperative to sustain democracy and democratic schools.

Key words: democracy, Visioning Institute, leadership, autoethnography

1. Introduction

This article presented a creative and interpretive narrative story based upon data gathered through the questionnaires and direct, face-to-face interviews with twelve superintendents of independent public school districts as founding members of the *Public Education Visioning Institute of Texas*. Using autoethnography as a research methodology in the section *Let the Symbols Speak*, within my imagination I envisioned a story created from the polyvocal voices of the leaders who had reiterated their personal stories to me through the collected qualitative data sources that would follow the pattern of the monomyth of separation or departure, initiation or trials, and return (Campbell, 1968).

In early fall while actually driving to New Mexico for the purpose of a total immersion into an indepth analysis of the data sources, I envisioned gathering all of the superintendents together for a fall golf retreat in the mountains so that I could synthesize the data from the study within the framework of a creative and interpretive story. The superintendents had both personally and collectively struggled with their newfound common vision of leadership gained through their participation in the Visioning Institute and I believed that autoethnography provided the most appropriate means to tell their story in an interesting and creative way. Much of the data collected exposed the commonalities of iconic values, vision, a passion for change, and an interesting camaraderie that might be shared among superintendents during a golf game, a bar-b-que dinner, and a fall retreat. The imagined superintendents' fall retreat did not actually transpire, but provided a creative canvas to display their responses to the question regarding their efficacy and praxis as school leaders due to their participation in the Visioning Institute in an innovative way. Pseudonyms were used in the narrative for the superintendents and for

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their districts to maintain confidentiality.

By creating beautiful spaces of learning for all children (Maxcy, 1995) in a chaotic world through their “rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward” (Campbell, 1968, p. 11), the superintendents of the Public Education Visioning Institute of Texas as school leaders contributed richer insight and a deeper understanding of the moral imperative of instilling democracy and democratic values in their schools. In a metaphorical sense, the superintendents of the Public Education Visioning Institute believed that the principles upon which schools can now be transformed are analogous to our founding documents of the Federalist Papers, the Articles of Confederation, and the U. S. Constitution. Regarding their work in the Visioning Institute, the school leaders posited that their document “may not rise to that magnitude of importance or clarity of expression of the philosophical underpinnings of our great nation . . . we sincerely believe that moving in this new direction for educating the young is fundamental to the survival of the nation of the free they envisioned and created. We see the Federalist Papers as symbolic of the conversations for understanding that must be stimulated and provided for now” (Creating a New Vision, May 2008, p. 11). Through their participation in the Visioning Institute, the superintendents formulated a common vision based upon their shared values and the principles within our founding documents to portray a unifying epiphany of their transformational experience.

This vision was formed within the dialogue of the new conversations as outlined in the work-in-progress document *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas of the Public Education Visioning Institute of Texas* that became a prime catalyst solely based upon shared American values framed within our founding documents. Through the work of these school leaders, the metaphorical message reiterating within this document created a deep and symbolic meaning that resonated even more clearly through story. For the combined stories and polyvocal voice of these superintendents and the researcher through the creative and interpretive narrative, “let the symbols speak” (Campbell, 1968, p. viii).

2. Let the Symbols Speak

It was hard to believe that I was finally on my way to immerse myself in the data that I had collected this summer for a whole solitary week in the mountains of New Mexico. Red River, New Mexico had held a special place for me throughout my life for it was there that I had spent countless summers, Christmas seasons, and Labor Day Weekends with my family. It was a special place of scenic beauty and happy memories accompanied by the sweet, muffled sound of the babbling water running down the mountainside along the river’s edge chasing invisible trout downstream. In my mind’s eye, I could still remember seeing our two little girls, grown ones now with families of their own, with long dark hair flying amid a burst of colored ribbons, running and laughing together on the sloping hillsides of Red River as my husband cast yet another lure into the water holding an expectant fly rod. As I drove the distance alone from the Panhandle of Texas up through the winding, narrowing roads to these familiar mountains of New Mexico, I rolled down the car window just to catch the faint but fresh hint of mountain breeze awaiting me just beyond the horizon. This long awaited trip to the mountains would give me an opportunity to put all other things back in Texas aside for a laser-like focus upon my data and a week of endless writing.

As the odometer of my car slowly clicked off mile after mile, thinking about the daunting task of data analysis that lay before me amid such pressing deadlines, I calmly smiled in remembrance of the incredible school leaders whom I had met last summer during the interview process of my study. In a whirlwind of even more miles

and extensive driving time in the intense Texas heat, I had made the pilgrimage to their districts to meet these brave leaders who were envisioning a brighter future for the students of their districts that might perhaps even extend throughout the entire state. Some of those trips involved Southwest Airlines and the friendly skies of Texas in addition to her never-ending highways and familiar Holiday Inns! Thankfully, I had taken digital photographs of each one of their administration buildings to serve as a personal memento of our encounters, had received personal business cards from some of them, and had mountains of interview transcriptions to help me make sense of both their individual and collective stories. Once again, I could only smile. Red River had not afforded any Holiday Inns for my weeklong stay, but Lifts West would certainly provide me the solitude for reflection and analysis for which I had driven so far.

As my small car edged closer on the winding road to the periphery of the forest blanketing the mountains of New Mexico, I could smell the sweet scent of pine. The towering and stately trees stood soldiering on shoulder-to-shoulder, serving as silent sentinels to the inner sanctum of retreat. What an incredibly beautiful place to study the data and to think about the things that truly matter in education and in life. The crisp mountain air breezed through my car's window, blowing my hair beyond repair. The wonder and majesty of these mountains could only echo and reverberate through my mind. I felt so small and insignificant in their midst.

As Red River welcomed my return, I pulled up to the efficiency at Lifts West that I had rented for the week and began to unload my car. The dissertation materials would be unloaded first, followed by the few clothes and groceries that I had brought along with me for the trip. The small bedroom, bath, and kitchen had all I would need as I settled in and spread out my data sources. I hooked up my printer, turned on my computer, sat in the Texas Tech lawn chair that had made the pilgrimage up from Texas with me, and gazed out the double glass doors to the mountains beyond. Not too far away from this beautiful spot in Red River, I remembered another hideaway also nestled away in the Rocky Mountains — a place called Pendaries.

As I sat back in my chair, I began to think about Pendaries as a retreat spot with a golf course that many superintendents from my regional area used every fall to get away from the demands of their jobs along with their colleagues in order to reflect, to strategize, and to plan for the upcoming school year. There was nothing else to do in Pendaries, New Mexico, than to play golf and to tell stories to one another. I wondered what would a retreat for the superintendents from the *Visioning Institute* whom I had met this past summer have been like? What would they have discussed with one another? Would the question of how their efficacy and praxis had changed due to their participation in the *Visioning Institute* as founding members been a topic of discussion? Would they play golf? Who would have won the game? What would these superintendents talk about during a weekend retreat in the mountains in early fall? What if I were at the fall retreat with them? What would our social interaction be like? What would they tell me as a researcher? I decided to create an interpretive story from my imagination using autoethnography methodology that might possibly tell their story based upon the data sources that lay spread out on the table before me.

2.1 Imagination

Pendaries. Set in the Sanctus de Christos Mountain Range of the Rocky Mountains, Pendaries, New Mexico, is the home of the Whispering Pines Lodge and Golf Course. The location had long been a favorite spot of Texas superintendents who were both eager and happy to escape the heated lowlands and the hyper-heated, congested urban areas of the Great State of Texas in the early fall of each year.

Something else much larger than myself or the need to complete my study had drawn me to the mountains. These superintendents had spoken to the deepest core of my very heart and soul as an educator in an iconic, symbolic, and metaphorical way that truly went beyond words. The emergent themes of shared common values and vision through innovative and creative leadership, their genuine love for all of the children of their districts, and their unique yet collective passion for change in public education were inspiring and truly life changing. I had vowed to each of them to do my small part in whatever way I could to advance their vision of a democratic ideal. I remained intent on keeping that vow. Being in the mountains, I could now immerse myself in the data and reflect upon what I had learned from the superintendents about public schools.

As I contemplated a possible weekend retreat, I imagined the drive to Pendaries much like my drive to Red River had been. After I envisioned my final arrival at the Whispering Pines Lodge, I would have parked my car outside the main entrance and carefully would have carried my treasured doctoral materials in first. Level 4 hurricanes back in Texas could not have pried these materials from my wearied hands, I was quite sure. As I might have approached the check-in counter at the Lodge, I may have heard a familiar, friendly voice.

"Well, it's about time you got here, Janet! . . . We've been waiting for you! . . . Are you ready for me to beat you in a round of golf?" might have quipped a new-found favorite superintendent.

"Well, hello there, Dr. Brown! . . . I'm glad you made it up safely! . . . Just give me a few minutes to get settled in and I'll be down to take you up on that!" I replied with a grin. Just as I turned away from the counter, I saw several other superintendents standing around the fireplace exchanging good-natured barbs and challenges to one another. They waved at me and smiled. I waved and smiled back, fondly remembering what one of them had told me in our recent interview. I quickly rifled through the documents scattered on the table in front of me and located the materials from Dr. Hernandez. Perhaps he would have teased me as he had in our interview last summer.

"Nothing like getting a bunch of A-type personalities from a bunch of big, successful districts together, huh, Janet? . . . Just be sure to give us plenty of time to do all of the talking! . . . That's the hardest thing we've all had to learn in this *Visioning Institute* endeavor! . . . We all like to talk!" I had to laugh silently in remembrance. Yes, Dr. Hernandez. This would have been a weekend worth remembering alright. I imagined that I would have been happy to learn that all twelve had made the trip to Pendaries. I wondered how many of them actually knew how to play golf?

Like my drive to the mountains of Red River, New Mexico, the long day's drive to the mountains of Pendaries would also just be beginning to nudge the late afternoon sun to take a rest behind the mountain rim, outlined by the flanking tall pines. There would be no time for golf on the first day of the weekend. The varied hues of soft greens and a hint of gold highlighted nature's delight across the mountain's face, just as they did in Red River. The trees and their silent and noncomitant gaze would herald a peaceful evening of moonglow and incandescence that would light an imagined night's dinner of reflective conversations among the superintendents. Golf challenges would simply have to await the next day's light.

Something other than bar-b-que. Sitting in my Texas Tech foldable chair in Red River, New Mexico, the conversations that I imagined exchanged over dinner among the superintendents during an evening and perhaps later that same night around the fireplace in the Lodge's open foyer and meeting area would probably not disappoint any weary qualitative researcher; that is, unless said researcher would have preferred something other than bar-b-que. I believed it to be an ordinate rite of passage in Texas that to be a superintendent, bar-b-que must be the dish of choice. Uncertain whether the favorite dish was simply more available or more affordable in Texas,

I have never yet attended an educational gathering where superintendents are present without the dish being present also. The requisite staples of potato salad, brown beans, and sweet iced tea to accompany the bar-b-que'd beef, ribs, and sausage topped off with apricot preserves on Texas toast must have some type of primordial power to it. The superintendents all seemed to like it no matter the occasion.

Remembering the easy banter that I had experienced with the superintendents during our interviews, I envisioned a new conversation that might have occurred during a weekend retreat. I thought one superintendent might have said, "You know, Janet, I've been thinking about our conversation since we last met concerning how my efficacy and praxis, as you call it, Janet, (light laughter would surely pervade the room) might have changed due to my participation in the *Visioning Institute*. . . . Do you remember that question, gentlemen?" might be asked by Dr. Dawson, another favorite superintendent of mine.

"Oh, excuse me, ladies — I didn't mean to exclude you with my question, Ms. Barnes — and you, Janet," Dr. Dawson would have hastily added with an impish grin.

"Oh, that's ok, Orin. . . . I've got my eye on you," the lone female superintendent may have retorted. In my mind's eye I could see her easily gesturing with two fingers aimed at her own eyes and pointing those same two fingers at his. "Just wait till I get you on that golf course tomorrow!" she may have said.

"Bring it, Barnes. . . . Bring it!" he might confidently have replied.

The open and good natured banter among these superintendents was one of the things that I had observed in our interviews last summer. The possibilities of learning even more from these dedicated professional leaders while hidden away in the mountains of New Mexico in early fall presented even more intrigue and interest for me. Their camaraderie had been grounded in the deepest respect for one another and had been forged through the long and intensive professional development by famous, expert speakers and national trainers that they had experienced as a team through the course of the *Visioning Institute*. Each of them had relayed to me in our interviews that it was the most intensive and of the highest quality of professional development that they had ever experienced in their careers.

Like my experiences had with them, due to their participation in the *Visioning Institute*, the superintendents' experiences had generated epiphanies that had changed them forever. In answer to the question, of course, without doubt, their efficacy and praxis had changed. The *Visioning Institute* had awakened a half-forgotten memory within each one of the school leaders of the overarching and compelling meaning of democracy and had somehow struck a dissonant chord that required action and resolution. They would never be the same either as people or as leaders.

In looking at my data, I imagined that the evening's conversation might have evolved around the more pressing issues of education, standardized testing or as Dr. Brown had explained high-stakes testing as death by one cell, and how the *Visioning Institute* had clarified and reinforced many of their prior held beliefs and values about education. The superintendents would have interjected rich, deep, and meaningful insights into the conversation through their vast experience as school leaders. I was confident that these ideas and thoughts had so obviously been undergirded by their strong values and had so apparently taken root that they had begun to grow and to manifest themselves within their lives as leaders. Their ideas had held dominance within their group as a whole and had begun to radiate out to others throughout the state. As a researcher, I had attempted to take their comments, observations, and questions into my heart and mind as I had feverishly typed on my laptop while transcribing the interviews. It was a good thing that I had audio recorded all of our interviews! These people could talk fast!

As I examined the transcriptions, Dr. Brown might have led the charge, “You know, Janet, we’ve all learned to play the system really well. . . . It’s just that I think that we want to be more than a fill-in-the-bubble kind of district. . . . We want to take our kids beyond that and we just didn’t see any concerted effort on the state to do that because they were so busy putting together this convoluted accountability system — which — and I think most people lump assessment and accountability together. . . . I think there was a real yearning for most of us to really make sure that we were really headed down the path that fully prepared kids for more than just scoring well on the state’s high stakes tests.”

Even within the interviews, the superintendents had asked questions that demonstrated how deeply they had reflected upon those same questions themselves. My field notes revealed their reflections. For example, Dr. Leads might have asked the group, “How do you change direction? . . . You know, Diane Ravitch spoke in Dallas recently and three of my board members and two of my staff members and I went down there. . . . Her latest book is a study that we are studying through the *Visioning Institute*. . . . There was also a big article off of the head piece of the *Dallas Morning News* yesterday about the beauty of charter schools, but they don’t tell the whole story. . . . Ravitch is right on what’s happening to us, you know. . . . They know they’re trying to sink us and it’s kind of a bipartisan effort and so they’ve got to have a viable alternative when they do sink us and the charter school movement is a part of that. . . . But, we didn’t spend a lot of time in the *Visioning Institute* talking about those things. . . . We talked about making public ed better and more viable for the 21st century learners that we have and reinvigorating the partnership that we used to have with the federal and state government.” Charter schools had occupied much of education’s recent news, but public education was where these men and women had dedicated themselves and their work and focused their efforts in the *Visioning Institute*.

As I perused more of my notes, I found Dr. Brown’s similar response, “You know, a local news reporter from the Dallas paper interviewed me,” he had responded, “and referring to our works-in-progress document said, ‘Well, it seems like it’s not very specific.’ ‘It seems like there’s a lot missing.’ . . . And I told the reporter that he was missing the point. . . . We would be just like the state and the federal government if we made this thing so prescriptive . . . that, you know — here’s what you do. . . . As you all know, what we wanted was a document that allowed districts to go in their own direction. . . . Here are the premises. . . . Here are some things under the major points of the premise, but attack those premises yourself as a district, using your own strengths and weaknesses and adjusting to the needs of your students. . . . And so, I said to the reporter . . . I wish you would have asked me that question or told me about your reaction to the document before you just put it in there that it seems to lack specificity. . . . Well, of course! . . . It’s supposed to be flexible! . . . We’ve got all the specificity we need with *No Child Left Behind* and the state’s accountability.”

I had observed that Dr. Hernandez liked to sit back and do more listening than talking, but, he passionately had told me, “They all know that I support what we’re doing 100 percent. . . . However, they must remember, in my very large district, I have lots of children who would not be successful were it not for the state forcing teachers and principals to teach them. . . . Without some form of accountability, my children wouldn’t stand a chance in life.”

With a similar large 5A district, Dr. Fordham agreed with Dr. Hernandez’s statement. He told me, “Coming from one of the larger districts, I also know we have to hold people’s feet to the fire. . . . There has just got to be a more constructive way to go about things for our kids.”

Dr. Birdsong gave me the idea of attempting to tell the individual and yet collective story of the superintendents from the *Visioning Institute* as he explained in his interview, “Janet, I think that we all came to

this vision. . . . I studied Social Studies in school and it's really just the story of people and what they do. . . . How they encountered issues and how they worked through them, and you know, what their responses were — and so, it's really just the story of man.” He had continued, “You know, it's interesting that you speak of storytelling, Janet. . . . Because I was listening to a podcast of Daniel Pink a few weeks back. . . . He said the future — you, know, he's been talking about design, but really the next step is storytelling. . . . And we've got to realize I think in the classroom that ultimately I think what really engages people is storytelling. . . . But there's got to be more than one story teller, not just the teacher. . . . Teachers — if they would think about themselves as artists and storytellers, it would change the way they look at what they do in the classroom.”

I could almost imagine hearing one of the superintendents possibly teasing me with his reminder, “What did I tell you earlier in our interview, Janet?” Dr. Hernandez may have quipped. “I warned you that we all like to talk!” Light laughter and some chuckles would surely envelop the room. Recalling that Dr. Birdsong was never deterred from his message in our interview, he had pressed on passionately, “There was a reason we all came to this new vision, Janet. . . . We had been complaining about the Legislature, high stakes testing, and accountability, but we weren't offering anything constructive. . . . We simply didn't know what the future was. . . . As time has gone by, it's become clearer and clearer, and we struggled to come to a common vision — and that is how you obtain vision, by the way. . . . I mean, I've got Senge's Fifth Discipline on my bookcase along with books about vision, and you know, he talks about you don't just go get a vision. . . . It's kind of like that Progressive Insurance commercial, you know, take it off the shelf, we know that vision is not one person's vision.”

“And this comes back to storytelling, by the way,” Dr. Birdsong had continued. “Senge says that you reach vision by knowing what your own personal story is. . . . And so, we're doing two things all the time. . . . We're working on our own personal story and we're working on developing common vision and the degree in which we're aware of that helps in terms of becoming who we are. . . . But I have, as an individual, and as a practitioner been working on my own personal story, writing it and writing it and writing it, inside myself and through my work, and — as a collaborator with other people in an organization and in public education. . . . So, the development of vision is getting to that — you get together and you start hashing it out and it's ugly. . . . We weren't sure what we were going to do. . . . In the early days, it was hazardous.”

“Yes,” Dr. Brown would also have agreed. In his interview, early on, he had suggested, “It was brutal.”

In reflecting on how his efficacy and praxis had changed, Dr. Birdsong explained the significance of their efforts in the *Visioning Institute*. He had explained, “That's where some of the history of this — we turn to the origins of our country, the struggle that the framers had, to help us get through what we were doing. . . . We didn't consider, you know, designing a vision and proposing a vision for public education in Texas as quite the same as proposing leaving Great Britain and forming an invasion, but they are both important. . . . Yes, they are both important and meaningful. . . . And it's kind of funny; there was a PBS series on John Adams. . . . And at the very end, the last episode, John Adams is old, about to die, and someone brought a painting of the framers of the Constitution while they were meeting together and it's kind of a classical looking painting and it's a famous painting, but John Adams first saw it and he looks at it and he goes, it wasn't like that.”

Sitting in his office behind his desk surrounded by historical pictures and countless books on history, Dr. Birdsong had lamented, “And, you know, we were in our work nearly done with talking through what we were doing, and I mentioned that we need to keep thinking about everything, but I said, the thing about it is it wasn't like that, because it was ugly, argumentative, not in a negative way, not in an adversarial way, but we were taking it very seriously. . . . I'm not sure how you bring your vision or how you share your vision is like that. . . . It's

where the one thing we did well was commit ourselves to the process.”

Dr. Birdsong revealed how deeply analogous he and his colleagues had believed our founding documents were with what they were doing in the *Visioning Institute*, “We were dedicated to that. . . . And we nearly fell apart in the early days. . . . That’s when our Design Team Leader brought out the Declaration of Independence and it was a turning point for us. . . . And, you know, you talk about some guys who were pretty successful — and who were competent people, great districts, and for the most part, pragmatic men and women, though I think that they—all of them had the element of thinkers, too, about them, but he brought that out and we read it carefully. . . . I studied history and I don’t know how many times I taught that. . . . And I had never seen that work like that before. . . . And no one else had either.”

This imagined evening might have yielded something much more other than just bar-b- que. This purposive sample of superintendents of independent public school districts in Texas and the multiple data sources that were collected within the study worked together to better understand the symbolic language of the iterative and interrelated stories of these school leaders and also worked together to weave a united tapestry of the democratic ideal in American public schools through their innovative leadership (Campbell, 1968).

A round of golf. The game of golf might be a fitting and even iconic metaphor for the work begun by these superintendents in Texas. To be successful in the game, a player has to know the course, possess the right equipment, have the knowledge and skills to choose, to grip, and to swing the correct club at the ball, to understand the lay of the land, progress through the fairways while avoiding the rough and/or sand traps, to be aware of all hazards on the course, understand how to read the greens, often depend upon others who are more skillful as teammates in getting to the green, not to mention the weather, and to meet the ultimate goal of the game — to tap the little white ball into the hole. Although there may be myriad ways to stroke the ball in getting to the hole as there are players who attempt the game, the reality remains that the hole never moves. So it may be with educational leadership. The target had been set by the state. However, the players of the game within the *Visioning Institute* were not quite ready to surrender total local control of the game.

The players. From the beginning of the study, it became clear that the selected group of 35 superintendents who were invited to join the *Visioning Institute* represented various types of districts that served over 1.2 million students to begin this work-in-progress would be an appropriate sample. Of the 35 founding superintendents within the *Visioning Institute*, eleven males and one female superintendent agreed to participate in the study. These were all very experienced superintendents of 6 to 9 and 10 plus years of service as indicated on their questionnaires who served in 3A, 4A, and 5A schools in some of the most prestigious and successful districts in the state of Texas and who also represented the widest range of diversity of cultures possible. Their accomplishments and reputations far exceeded the boundaries of their individual districts.

As one member of the Design Team, Dr. Doug Taylor had iterated an important point in our interview, “It’s important to note, Janet, that all of the districts represented in the *Visioning Institute* are highly successful within the current system. . . . We have all reached the highest levels of success. . . . We are not a bunch of people who are throwing stones at the current system because we cannot be successful within it. . . . I think it’s very important to note that in your study. . . . What we are trying to do is to develop an alternative measure of achievement that goes beyond the pale.”

I remembered how another superintendent, Dr. Matt Brown believed that the current system had “everything in its own silo and it’s created by legislation — but accountability is totally different than what good thinking is about assessment and how to really get at what kids actually know as opposed to what goes on in the classroom

with the new digital learner and public partnerships, and so, everything was being done in silos and there was no interconnection, and we thought, you know what, we could have these conversations where all these things weave together, then the vision could be a lot more clear; it would make sense, and hopefully, be something that the Legislature and school districts could take the document and do something. . . . I would say without doubt, our biggest frustration is with high stakes testing because we talked to experts and we know intuitively as educators that that is a very poor, poor way to determine what kids know or how a campus is doing or a school district. . . . And so, that's our largest frustration. . . . As superintendents, we've got to fix that."

In a day's imagined round of golf, twelve of these experienced superintendents from premier school districts from our southwestern state might scramble in three teams of four players. The teams would have been selected by members of the *Visioning Institute's* Design Team who would have carefully placed the superintendents on balanced teams upon considering their handicaps and play experience. Those superintendents who represented the most successful district in acquiring the highest state rating for the longest number of years would probably tee off first, using an old golfing term of having the honors. A few of these distinguished superintendents might possibly hold the honors by being instrumental in leading their districts to develop new high schools for college and career readiness for digital learners.

The goal of the game. In the state of Texas, high stakes testing results within the accountability system yielded the ultimate goal of becoming an exemplary district as the highest rating possible. This meant that every student subpopulation group must reach 90% or above in all tested categories. Other student groups such as Special Education and Limited English Proficient students are included in the federal system of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), but this study did not address the federal system per se. The fact remains that the state does not move the goal. The number of strokes and the ways districts may approach the ball begins every fall of the school year as the game begins. This year would hold no exception. If the game of golf would serve as a metaphor for these superintendents in my imagined game in the mountains, then they must understand the goal and lead their districts with vision, effective and skillful leadership, and precision while knowing and understanding their equipment, their individual players, their team, and the knowledge and skills that their districts possess in order to be the ultimate winners at the game for every child. As evidenced in the interviews and within the questionnaires, here is where their frustration lies.

During the interviews, I had asked each superintendent the question, "In looking over the questionnaire that you kindly filled out for me, I noticed that you embrace the common vision for public education of the Visioning Institute and indicated that you were dissatisfied with the current system — that there was no clear vision for the future for public education. . . . Is that a correct assessment of your response? . . . Is this why you joined the Institute?" The answers that the superintendents offered to these questions both singularly and collectively posited an interesting rationale for their choosing to participate in the Visioning Institute in the first place.

On his questionnaire, Dr. Mario Hernandez wrote, "I'm frustrated with the current state of affairs. I'm willing and wanting to do something differently. . . . The *Institute* has had a big impact on me and how I view education and the world. . . . District progress is much slower to evolve, but I want to ensure that all children have access to a quality, meaningful education."

Dr. Tim Birdsong, another superintendent passionately wrote, "The Institute seemed to be an opportunity to extend the work we were already doing in my district, but also ushered a call to action, perhaps, in a way, like the call to the Constitutional Convention. . . . I was excited to collaborate with distinguished peers and to work towards a consensus and a vision that could transform public education in Texas."

Dr. Sarah Barnes, the sole female superintendent also explained, “I believed that district leaders should develop a new vision for public education in Texas — not legislators. . . . I had grown more and more frustrated from the continued interference from the state.”

This call to action served as a clarion call to each of these superintendents to address the problems at hand within their districts and across our state by joining together in a *Visioning Institute* to survey the current state of education in Texas, to step up and to step out through their leadership with a clear vision in new and dynamic ways to bring about the dramatic change that goes way beyond merely tapping a ball into a hole. As a moral imperative, the need that was and is so direly requisite exists to continually instill and to ensure our democratic way of life through creative and innovative leadership in schools.

The monomyth revisited. The superintendents’ fall retreat that I envisioned within my imagination would have presented ample opportunities for deeper inquiry through conceptual thinking and a genuine reflection for me as a qualitative researcher. Reminiscent of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth borrowed from James Joyce, I would not wish to resist the metaphorical parallels. In Campbell’s monomyth, there are three cycles that comprise the Journey of the S/Hero: separation or departure, initiation or trials, and the return. Interestingly, the superintendents had heard and answered the call to adventure by accepting membership into the *Visioning Institute*.

The superintendents had separated themselves through their membership to pursue a new vision and deeper insights into the direction that public education should take. Just as an imagined fall retreat might have separated these leaders from their districts and daily responsibilities, they had stood apart united with one purpose in achieving a democratic ideal for their schools and for all children in Texas by their participation. Through the workshops, trainings, and pressing work inspired by the *Visioning Institute* since September of 2006, these superintendents had experienced many personal trials through testing, sacrificed precious time and resources away from their districts in order to participate in the *Institute*, experienced epiphanies of discovery, and had displayed real courage in the face of change with their school boards, their communities, and their colleagues. The hazards and obstacles that had stood in their way had to be confronted and overcome with a constancy of purpose through the criticality of their own individual leadership. After their sojourning, they had to return to their districts in Texas. An imagined but possible weekend interlude in the mountains of New Mexico might have refreshed their minds and their spirits and prepared them once again to face any challenges or the seemingly insurmountable invisible mountains that may lie before them this school year. A creative and interpretive fall retreat might have created a backdrop and synergy of dramaturgy, play, and social interactionism among the superintendents that would long be remembered as a season for change in public education amid the mountaintops of Pendaries.

A fond farewell. While sitting in my Texas Tech chair, looking up into the mountains of Red River after surveying the mountains of qualitative materials of data that now surrounded me, I reflected upon what a fall retreat into the mountains of New Mexico might have been like for the superintendents whom I had so intently studied. I could imagine packing up my small car to return to the plains of Texas, having feelings of friendship and separation that would definitely have been bittersweet. These collegial comrades had forged lasting friendships filled with deep respect and admiration through their united work in the *Visioning Institute*. I could imagine them smiling in preparation of their return trip while jovially teasing one another one last time, shaking hands, some even possibly hugging, while others would soundly slap one another on the back to wish one another a great school year. I could easily imagine seeing how their combined vision had been forged with a powerful, unknowing strength of purpose. These were the men and women that would ultimately change the face of public education in Texas. Their vision and wise leadership were blazing a solitary path that others would soon follow.

How lucky I am, I thought, to have met these fine people, to have actually talked with them and asked them questions, and to have been able to imagine witnessing a transformation at the very font of the spring running so quickly down the Rocky Mountains to the sea. By having the honor of knowing these incredible people, I do not believe that I will ever be the same again either. Surely, I reflected, our kids are in safe hands. Their hands.

3. Public Education Visioning Institute Document Review

The story of the *Public Education Visioning Institute* began among school superintendents and other school leaders with conversations. Often these conversations were dominated by compliance issues of how to implement the latest mandates from Austin and Washington while at other times “the exchanges relate[d] to school finance, politics, changing demographics, challenges of technology and its impact on students and society, the test-focused craze, dysfunctional school boards, and the negative impacts of the present accountability mechanisms on students and teachers” (*Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, May 2008, p. 36).

At times, these critical conversations turned to questioning themselves in how they allowed themselves to be co-opted into policies that they knew were counterproductive and they questioned why they were reluctant to more fully represent their communities in the name of meaningful change and improvement. But when their questions turned the discussion to concern the future for Texas public education, “no clear picture emerge[d] to frame the conversation. We sense[d] the present direction [was] wrong but what direction would we propose?” (*Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, May 2008, p. 26).

The *Visioning Institute* held its first meeting on September 6-7, 2006, and met for seven sessions during 2007 with an additional work session in November and the most recent meetings in January 2008, 2009, and June 2010. The Design Team continues to meet and additional sessions are being orchestrated as next steps. A *Principals’ Visioning Institute* and a *Trustees 4 Transformation Visioning Institute for Board Members* are currently in the design stages. An *Assessment Team of the Visioning Institute* has also been assembled and is currently working with national experts in designing an alternative assessment system to be offered to the state Legislature in January 2011. As one superintendent relayed to me, Robert Scott, the Texas State Commissioner of Education at the time has received and has read their document *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* as have many of our state legislators.

Another superintendent from an extremely successful district explained that the challenge for him as well as for others was how do they make excellent districts even greater? It is exciting to contemplate where the efforts of these dedicated leaders may lead public education in the future and what unknown standards of excellence they may achieve. Their work raises an important question for all school leaders. Will the efforts of these superintendents of the *Visioning Institute* ultimately transform public education in the state of Texas?

The purpose for the *Visioning Institute* as framed in the *Invitation Letter to Prospective Participants in the Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas* document indicated an ongoing, work-in-progress by these dedicated superintendents to create and to encourage a new dialogue and conversation about public education among school leaders. With their vision and leadership, perhaps public education will enjoy a new surge of interest for instilling democracy and democratic values within ensuing generations of American youth both now and in the future.

4. Discussion

The overwhelming and resounding answer of the superintendents to the research question regarding if/how their efficacy and praxis as school leaders had changed due to their participation in the *Visioning Institute* was uniformly and unanimously affirmative. Each superintendent unequivocally reiterated that their participation had indeed changed them in almost indescribable ways as school leaders. The work-in-progress document that the superintendents had written during their participation was being used in their districts in numerous ways by causing their personnel, board members, teachers, and parents to examine the document to make their own sense of it with a quest to begin to embrace the common vision for which the superintendents had so long struggled.

Interestingly, I found that the common threads of vision and leadership were intertwined within the superintendents' comments about their effectiveness and practice due to their participation in the *Visioning Institute*. One could simply not speak of one idea without the other. The interface that existed among the archetypal concepts of vision, leadership, democracy, values, morality, and service within the constructs of our conversations revealed a commonality of mind and quiet strength of persistence in pushing their vision forward. These unique men and women believed to their very core in the work that they had begun and the concepts that they were proposing were right, good, and true and were grounded upon our founding principles as a nation of free people.

The monomyth also proved to be appropriate for this creative approach. These incredibly accomplished leaders had willingly accepted the call to the journey of the s/hero. They had departed from the constant demands of their jobs to separate themselves for a season to learn, to study, to discuss, to challenge and even to argue, and to finally reach consensus of what is truly important for public education. Each of them had experienced various trials, testing, and tribulations posed by their school boards, their communities, their friends, and even by one another. Sacrifices had to be made. Costs had to be paid. However, their unified commitment to the process withstood the tests and trials of time. Their story goes on.

One of the greatest of ironies in the imagined setting of the monomyth in Pendaries, New Mexico was the fact that there in the mountains of New Mexico where some of the most distinguished and successful superintendents from the state of Texas might have chosen to retreat for play and to discuss some of the most pressing issues in public education was located in one of the lowest performing states in the nation. With over 75 per cent of schools in New Mexico not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) amid staggering drop-out rates (U. S. Department of Education), it was there that the most successful school leaders with brilliant educational minds from Texas had convened within the confines of my imagination. Perhaps in time, their work would transcend state lines and other children throughout America could find the hope of academic success.

5. Summary

Like the founding framers before them, these brave school leaders persisted and persevered through their participation as founding members in the *Visioning Institute* because they were in pursuit of something much larger than themselves, something more for the common good of all children in public education. The imagined return of these superintendents to the lowlands and congested urban areas of Texas from their mountaintop experience might have proven to be their constancy of purpose in keeping their eyes upon the ball. They would not fail. It was not in them to fail. Because of these superintendents, perhaps democracy will not fail either. To

borrow a phrase from William Faulkner, perhaps democracy will not merely endure, but will prevail.

By examining a unique application of interpretive and creative narrative using autoethnography methodology based upon data gathered through the questionnaires and direct, face-to-face interviews with superintendents, this article presented an alternative use of narrative framed within a monomyth to serve as a catalyst for interpretation, conversation, and dialogue within this study. Findings of the results from the data collection within the qualitative research study indicated several emergent and transcendent themes, such as, an iconic unity of values, vision, and passion for change among the superintendents through archetypal leadership and a singular and comprehensive commitment to improve public schools not only for their own students, but also for all children. The implications of the study confirmed the need for further development of the *Visioning Institute* as a moral imperative to sustain democracy and democratic schools.

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