"No Common Thread": Identity Crisis at an Alternative School

Kristan A. Morrison, Ph.D.

Radford University

School of Teacher Education and Leadership

P.O. Box 6959

Radford, VA 24142

kmorrison12@radford.edu

(540) 831-7120 (office) (540) 831-5059 (FAX)

November 20, 2007

Abstract

This study uses the phenomenon, or case, of the White Pine School as the basis for developing an understanding of how schools make their identities clear, distinct, and attractive to participants. This twenty-six-year-old parent cooperative "alternative" private school seems to be experiencing an identity crisis in which there is little consistency of vision and practices with which to enact that vision. The causes, manifestations, and possible solutions to this identity crisis are herein examined.

Introduction

The term "alternative school" is an ambiguous one, which can mean many things to many people. Alternative generally means, though, that which is different from the norm or the conventional. So, if conventional education in the United States is

> largely hierarchical, [with] a standardized, required curriculum through which all students must proceed in order to graduate, and coercive methods predominate . . . [and if] in general the structure is pre-determined and authoritatively administered from principal to teacher, teacher to student (Bennis, 2006, p. 4-5)

then, non-conventional, or alternative, schools are those that differ from these normative conditions. In what ways they differ varies from alternative school to alternative school depending upon the ends being sought. Generally, alternative schools fall into two categories according to end goals, those that are sites of "experimentation and innovation" and those that are run by the public school systems as "safety valves – refuges for disaffected and unsuccessful students that allow the majority of schools to function more smoothly without dissent" (Miller, 2002, p. 136). While these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this paper is primarily focused on the former type of alternative school, those that seek to negate and overcome conventional school characteristics through experimentation and innovation. In other words, the alternative schools of which I write in this article are those purposely designed to challenge the status quo definitions of schools rather than to serve as school district "dumping grounds" for students who refuse to conform to the conventional rules and practices.

My use of the term alternative schools in this article encompasses schools defined in many ways– holistic schools, free schools, student-centered schools, progressive schools,

democratic schools, parent-cooperative schools, etc. While each are unique (and thus why it is difficult to create an umbrella term for them besides "alternative"), all are seeking to somehow counter the conventional curricular standardization and bureaucratic/ depersonalized control found in most U.S. public and private schools. Being able to articulate how they seek to negate and transcend the norm is vital for helping such schools survive. Without a clear vision, there is no clear identity, and if an alternative school lacks a clear identity, lacks an explanation of how it differs from, and is perhaps superior to, the norm, then there's little incentive for parents, teachers, or students to become affiliated with it. A school's lacking of a clear identity can be likened to an identity crisis in an individual. In such a crisis, or diffused state, the individual has no consistent image of self and has not deeply explored or committed himself to particular goals, values, or lifestyle. The individual reaches no conclusion about who he is or the direction he wishes to go with his life (Woolfolk, 2005, p. 65).

An alternative school suffering from such an identity crisis is the subject of this article. This identity crisis manifested in inconsistencies of practice, differing educational philosophies among parents and teachers, shifting players (enrollment, staffing), and conflicted relationships. The story of this school's identity crisis is an important one to tell as it could, perhaps, serve as a cautionary guide for individuals seeking to create their own alternative schools. After briefly describing the school and my methodology, I explore how the identity crisis manifests itself as well as the possible causes for these manifestations. In many ways, the causes and effects in this particular case are recursive and difficult to pull apart, but I hope that my attempts to do so will aid other alternative schools in their development. I conclude the article with a discussion of how the school is dealing with its identity crisis, and a brief discussion of school visioning literature which may assist other schools in avoiding their own identity crises.

Description of school

The White Pine School is located in a predominantly white (97%) rural community in the southeastern USA (population approximately 15,000, median income $32,000). At the start of the 2006-2007 school year, the White Pine School had an enrollment of 34 students from 25 families. The school has four classroom teachers, one art teacher, one music teacher, one Spanish teacher, one yoga/P. E. teacher, one office manager, and one director. There are four multi-age classes in the school: 1) preschool (ages 2-4), nine students; 2) Kindergarten and first grade, eight students; 3) second through fourth grade, ten students; and 4) fifth grade through high school, seven students.

The school sits on about eight acres of mostly wooded land and has three buildings – one for the administrative office, one for the library and second through fourth grade class, and one housing the preschool classroom, kindergarten and first grade classroom, fifth grade through high school classroom, kitchen, and "specials" (yoga, art, music, Spanish) classroom.

The White Pine School defines itself as a parent-cooperative school. This means tuition dollars pay for operational costs (e.g. mortgage, utilities, insurance, salaries) and then parents, as part of their parent-school contract, carry out remaining tasks. For example, parents are required to participate for 15 hours during scheduled workdays, doing maintenance, cleaning, and other miscellaneous tasks, and for 25 hours assisting in fundraising events each year. In addition, parents must sign up for at least one school committee (committees cover such things as events, grant writing, finance, fundraising, library, conflict resolution, public relations, etc.). Other requirements of the parent-school contract include attendance at one parent-teacher conference, and three all- school meetings.

The school runs on an abbreviated academic calendar: it is in session Mondays through Thursdays from Labor Day to the Thursday before Memorial Day (the students attend for a total of 135 days). Each day runs from 9:00 AM to 3:00 PM with a one hour break for lunch.

Methodology

I located this school on the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) website listing of educational alternatives in the United States. According to this listing, "what the schools and organizations generally have in common is a learner-centered approach to education" (http://www.educationrevolution.org/aero-member-schools.html). This school is also listed in AERO's 1995 edition of its *Almanac of Education Choices*. The introduction to this book explains that "what educational alternatives generally have in common is an approach that is more individualized, with more respect for the students, parents, and teachers, and is more experiential and interest based" (p.1). The White Pine School's website confirmed such descriptions. For example, teachers' philosophies found on the website stated such ideas as "children are people too, they deserve a safe and caring environment to explore, learn, and grow with their own pace and to be respected as capable individuals," and students should "learn independence that they may become individuals who think for themselves" (url refernce not included for confidentiality purposes). Further confirmation of this school's learner-centered approach came from a phone conversation with the art teacher who not only taught at the school, but also had sent her children there from preschool to eighth grade. This teacher elaborated on the school's philosophical approach, using the phrase "child-cued" a number of times to indicate that teachers try to follow students' interests in planning curricula. Lastly, in my initial meeting with the school director to introduce the possibility of my research project, she provided me a

school handbook, in which the school's mission statement was listed. "The mission of White Pine School is to foster individuals' growth and love of learning within an integrated educational and social matrix that emphasizes mindfulness and respect for individuals' choices, communications, and expressions" (*School Handbook*, p. 3).

With these initial indications that the school might be different from the norm, I began my research. Over a three-month period I attempted to learn exactly how this school enacted practices that were different from conventional public pre-K to 12th grade schools in the area. To gain these understandings, I used the following data sources:

- *Classroom observations* – I spent 42 hours observing in the White Pine School's four multi-age classrooms (9-12 hours in each).
- *Records data* – The school provided me copies of progress report forms, committee listings and explanations, parent-school contracts, academic year calendar, teacher contracts, parent-teacher communication forms, maintenance forms, teacher handbook, parent handbook, and so on. I also reviewed the school's website and conducted an internet search of the regional newspaper for stories on the school.
- *Interviews* – Over a three-month period, I conducted 11 semi-structured narrative interviews with the four classroom teachers, five parents, the school office manager, and the school director. Each interview lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, and all were tape recorded and transcribed for coding.

The Identity Crisis: Manifestations and Causes

As mentioned above, I had anticipated finding a school practicing a distinct, non-conventional, student-centered educational philosophy. Instead, I found a school where confused

parents and teachers were struggling with trying to figure out the school's purposes, methods, and overall identity. My research revealed two main manifestations of the school's identity crisis: inconsistencies of practice, and shifting players. Embedded within each manifestation were various causes for its existence.

Inconsistencies of Philosophy and Practice

Inconsistencies in philosophy. In my interviews with parents and teachers, I encountered a lack of consistent responses to what the school's vision seems to be. For example,

> As far as the philosophies or the learning style, I think it's pretty broad right now and I'd like to see that more focused and have a more concrete vision and mission that everybody can really grasp and understand what it is that [the school] is offering. And so I think right now it's kind of what the teacher brings. (Roberta, parent)

> I think that the mission of the school is not clear. And I have a really difficult time with that. (Sheila, parent)

> [The school is] just kind of floating in some kind of amorphous [sic] of what either teachers or parents see fit. I don't see a strong direction. I don't see the school standing for something, which . . . if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. (Travis, parent)

> There's no general consensus. I don't see a common thread. (Susan, teacher)

> I'm not seeing clearly where [the school] is going . . . I can see it going many different directions right now. (Katrina, teacher)

> I think everybody is confused about what should be done with the school. (Olivia, teacher)

One of the first questions I asked all the interviewed parents and teachers was what was their educational philosophy/how did they define a "good" education? With this question, I was seeking clarity on whether there was a core belief about both the school's end goals and the means to reach them. The interviews I conducted revealed a wide array of answers. Some ideas were held by nearly all and could easily coexist with other ideological tenets, while some ideas either stood in contradiction to others or were not held by all interviewees. Those consistent and complementary ideas included: a good education is one that nurtures children in a safe, personal, and welcoming environment that is responsive to them and their families' needs; a good education teaches children independence and self discipline; and one should work to attain goals for one's own intrinsic satisfaction rather than for extrinsic rewards (e.g. others' praise, grades).

Beyond these two key ideas, though, the other philosophical assertions began to get a bit murky and inconsistent. For example, a number of teachers and parents stated beliefs that a good education should place a large *primary* emphasis on core academic disciplines (e.g. math, language arts, science, social studies) and keep students up to standards similar to those adopted in many states' public schools. Other parents and teachers asserted that a good education should value activities outside these core academics, such as art, movement, outdoor play and nature study, social interaction, and self-understanding, and should not be overly preoccupied with isolated study of conventional academic subjects and state standards. Still other parents and

teachers stated that a good education is concerned more with confronting, challenging, and acting on social issues (e.g. societal gender norms, environmental problems, capitalism's excesses, etc.) so that children can become critical, creative players in world issues and problems. While these ideas are certainly not mutually exclusive, they do each represent distinct educational philosophies (Essentialism, Progressivism, and Social Reconstructionism respectively) (Bagley, 1941; Kilpatrick, 1941; Brameld, 1970), and so the issue of prioritization arises – should one approach be privileged over others? Should varying aspects be picked from each to create an "eclectic" philosophy of education for the school? What is most worth knowing? From my analysis of interviews, I gained no sense of consistency about how the school and its participants would answer these questions.

Another contested idea arose in terms of the best way to approach instruction. While all interview participants asserted beliefs in following children's interests and individualizing for each child's own pace, many interviewees also stated a contradictory desire for teachers to really imprint on children the necessity and worth of studying certain subjects, even to the point, for some, of compulsion.

The lack of a firm, conscious, and consistent educational philosophy among the participants at the school seems to have caused the inconsistencies of educational practice evident at this school in the areas of curriculum and instruction, and accountability.

Inconsistencies in curriculum and instruction. Many conventional schools typically have a hierarchy of subjects in which the canonical disciplines of language arts, history, math, and science take precedence over less conventionally-valued subjects, such as art, physical movement, and nature study (evidenced by how the former subjects are often labeled "required/ core" classes while the latter are often labeled "electives", "non-core", or "specials" and by how

scheduling of time for the former is often privileged over the latter in many conventional schools). The White Pine School echoed this conventional hierarchy to some degree. Built firmly into each of the three oldest classes' daily schedules was a study of math and language arts, for an average total of four hours per week per subject. These three classes had also built in a study of science and social studies for an average of 1.5 hours per week per subject. [1] While students did have firmly scheduled subjects such as art, music, yoga/physical education, and Spanish, they only had these for 30 minutes to one hour total each week. This scheduling pattern closely follows that of conventional public schools. Conversely, though, the White Pine School gave students a great deal more outside free time in the form of snack breaks and recess than conventional schools (an average of 1.5 hours a day, close to five hours a week), which showed the school's belief in the value of outdoor play, free physical movement, and ample time to eat. So, while the White Pine School was unconventional in scheduling more "free time" (in the form of more time for eating, socializing, and playing), it was quite conventional in its hierarchical ranking of certain curricular subjects over others. This conventional hierarchy seems to run counter to the alternative school definition of being more learner-centered. If one of the school's main foci was on being learner-centered, then it seems to me that there would be more flexibility in the curriculum content and scheduling of subjects.

In terms of instruction, in many conventional public schools, teachers create lesson plans from the district-approved curriculum, lead whole and small group instruction, try to keep children at roughly the same pace, and monitor student behavior by enforcing school and classroom rules. This teacher-directed model of education contrasts a student-directed, non-conventional, model in which students have much more say in what is studied, how, and when.

[1] The preschool class is an exception to this subject hierarchy. Early childhood education is unusual even in conventional schools for having much more of an emergent/child-centered curriculum, one that is less scheduled and regimented than grades Kindergarten through twelve.

The White Pine School showed evidence of both the teacher-directed and student-directed models.

Some signs of teacher direction included the fact that children were compelled to work in certain "academic" subjects more than others. The teachers, either on their own initiative or under pressure from certain parents, chose to schedule the day in such a way that these subjects (e.g., math, language arts, science, or social studies) were privileged over other non-core academic subjects. Additionally, teachers in all classrooms consistently monitored and corrected student behavior, were quick to point out students being unkind to others, being "off-task," or not following established classroom rules. Thus, there seemed to be a clear sense in these classrooms that the teacher was "in charge" and directing things.

At the same time, there was student-direction and independent work in all classes as well. Teachers often allowed children to work as slowly or quickly as they needed. There was a great deal of independent work in the classrooms, particularly during math and language arts times. During these times in the K-1st grade, 2nd-4th grade, and 5th-high school classrooms, students worked through worksheets or text pages at their own pace. Each child was on a different sheet or page depending upon whether she had mastered previous skills. In many cases, particularly in the fifth through high school class, students were involved in checking their own work for mastery and setting goals for how many concepts they wished to master in a given time period. Students were thus going at their own pace, learning self-reliance and self-regulation. (While one could well argue that such independent seat work is actually quite reminiscent of ineffective, outdated pedagogical practices, I would argue that the students were at least not being slowed down or speeded up to stay with an entire class's median speed, and thus define this White Pine School practice as more student-centered.) Students were also permitted a strong element of

choice and power in the classrooms. Teachers and parents spoke of how teachers often solicited from students and families topics of student interest and ideas to be incorporated as themes into daily instruction. For example, I observed Katrina's kindergarten through first grade class working on ocean habitat dioramas, a subject that Katrina later told me stemmed from expressed student interests. I observed a sixth grade student in Olivia's fifth grade through high school class expressing an interest in showing the film *The Last of the Mohicans,* which the teacher agreed would be a good idea so long as the student also did some research on the film's setting and historical context, which he could present prior to or after the showing. Students also expressed choice over initially teacher-assigned tasks (e.g. had choice in what books to read during reading time). Also, teachers did not object when students asked permission to get up, move around, or get a snack during work time. This level of choice, freedom of movement, and general understanding about students' different learning styles indicated the school was teaching children about self-regulation and self-governance.

So, while many of the above instructional practices leaned toward the unconventional student-directed model of instruction, the teacher-directed aspects mentioned earlier seemed, to me, to sometimes negate those leanings. For example, students needed to gain teacher permission to make alterations to assignments or move freely about the class; students were reliant upon teachers to make the effort to incorporate their interests into classroom themes (and the degree to which this was done *did* differ between teachers); students seemed always subject to teachers' interpretation and enforcement of school and classroom behavior rules; and students were expected to follow the teacher's general timetable. Teachers held most of the power, it seemed, which is antithetical to true student freedom of direction, and students, accordingly, showed signs of the alienation and disconnection from their work that is prevalent in conventional

teacher-directed schools. There appeared to be signs of what John Goodlad described in *A Place Called School* as an epidemic boredom – "a flat, neutral emotional ambience" (Goodlad, 1984, 242). For example, I observed students in the two oldest classes "watching the clock" with tremendous regularity and sighing volubly when they saw that there was more time required at a certain task. I also frequently noted in my field notes behaviors such as works stoppages and sabotage (e.g., children just sitting at desks refusing to continue with a task and instead subversively playing with a noisy toy that distracted others or the teacher, or drawing/doodling; interrupting other groups doing an assigned task, or attempting to get the teacher off track by posing a seemingly unnecessary query, repeatedly leaving the classroom for no apparent reason and returning shortly thereafter, etc.). I also observed students rushing to get work done just to get it done. For example, in the second through fourth grade classroom, one boy in particular filled out a math worksheet in about two minutes and claimed, "I'm done!" When the teacher went to check it, he declared that the student seemed to have just randomly written in numbers. These behaviors could just be explained away as typical children's occasional "antsy-ness," but I would argue that their regularity and manifestation in all the classes evidences something more. These behaviors looked extremely similar to those disengaged and alienated behaviors I noted in my own classes while a teacher in conventional schools, and in the classrooms of conventional public school teachers and student teachers I have observed.

The hybridization of conventional and unconventional left me, an outsider, confused. What did this school really believe about choice? What did it believe about students learning self-regulation when they are at the mercy of teachers' classroom power? What did it believe about students learning self-governance when they played no substantive role in developing

school policies? Why had this school chosen the mixture of teacher and student direction that it had? Consistent answers were nowhere to be found.

Inconsistencies in accountability. In addition to inconsistencies in philosophy, curriculum, and instruction, the White Pine School was also conflicted in terms of accountability practices. The school utilized a variety of mechanisms for evaluating student learning and communicating that learning to parents. These included homework assignments, and written communiqués that informed parents of what was currently being studied in a given classroom. Further, there were periodic parent-teacher conference sessions and class meetings, parents were invited to observe in classrooms, parents and teachers discussed with one another when problems with student learning arose, and they conversed with their children about what was being learned at school. None of these things are particularly unique, or non-conventional.

What is somewhat unconventional is that the White Pine School supplemented these forms of accountability with other, less conventional mechanisms. For example, the school used semi-narrative progress reports instead of conventional report cards with grades, which often use grades with few or no comments added (the preschool progress report was entirely narrative, while the other classes used more charts and checklists along with lengthy narrative comments) to communicate student learning on a quarterly basis. In the fifth through high school class, the teacher also actively solicited student self-evaluation when determining student progress. I observed an interchange in this classroom between the teacher and a sixth grader in which they discussed what math skills the student was having trouble understanding. I commented in field notes that, "overall, [the student] seemed very relaxed and honest in her evaluations of her abilities in math skills – she identified areas that she needed help on and seemed to have no shame over this." Another somewhat non-conventional aspect of accountability of the school

was the use of end-of-year portfolios of student work, rather than end-of-year standardized tests, to gauge summative learning.

While the school practiced more personalized forms of accountability than are evident in many conventional public schools, when I probed more deeply, I found that conventional elements have seeped into these non-conventional practices, specifically into progress reports. Some teachers altered their progress reports this past year to make them more reflective of state standards (e.g. using the state standards for various subjects as benchmarks of student success). Interviews with parents revealed mixed reactions to these changes; while some parents welcomed the changes, others raised concerns that the school was trying to be too much like public schools.

While interviewed parents and teachers seemed satisfied overall with the accountability structures, particularly with how the White Pine School went above and beyond conventional schools, they also wondered about the school's end goals. There seemed to be a great deal of inconsistency in understanding whether the White Pine School was focused on promoting individualized/unique student learning as would be evidenced by narrative progress reports, portfolios, and frequent informal parent-teacher discussions, or on comparing students one to another and to standardized benchmarks, as would be evidenced by the school using state standards checklists. Could the two coexist? If so, what was the clear rationale, and was one end dominant over another? Again, the disparate answers I received from parents and teachers in interviews and the lack of a clear explanation about school practices in any of the school's records data showed that there were no firm answers to these questions.

Curriculum, instruction, and accountability practices are directly connected to a school's educational philosophy. If that philosophy is unclear, as at the White Pine School, then it is no

surprise that inconsistencies will abound. Why were there these philosophical inconsistencies, though? One possible answer is the power of hegemonic visions of education in the wider society.

As Steven Wolk wrote in a recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, there is no real debate over what seems to be the purpose of education in our society today.

> The real barometer of the aims of our schools today is what's being said in our newspapers and our legislative assemblies. These mainstream voices and the proclamations emanating from the bully pulpit – be they newspaper editorials or speeches by the President – rule the public conversation and create our national school identity . . . Virtually every newspaper article and editorial, every radio report and discussion, every political speech and government policy that I read or hear says, either implicitly or explicitly, that the aim of our schools is to prepare future workers (Wolk, 2007, p. 650).

As discussed earlier above, there are many opinions at the White Pine School about what is most worth knowing. An examination of interviewees' responses to questions about why parents and teachers seem to hold the philosophies they do about curriculum and instruction revealed that some of the parents and teachers at the school seemed to feel the power of what Wolk identified as the hegemonic expression of school purposes, and this makes them skeptical and/or fearful of running a school that strays too far from these purposes. Those parents and teachers comfortable with non-conventional models of education worried that too many other parents at the school were swayed by these hegemonic visions. For example,

> I think the way that [the state content and skill] standards . . . are presented, it's almost like how could you not support them? You know? And it talks about accountability, and

> these kinds of buzzwords. It sounds like it's marketed . . . And so I think it's hard for people unless they have the time and energy to think about these things . . . But I think a lot of times people don't. (Sheila, parent)

> There is so much talk about cutting edge and going ahead and Kindergarten readiness. It's very scary for parents. And you don't want your kid to fall behind and you don't want them to not be up to par, and not be up to the standard . . . Part of it is the pressure that is coming at everybody from all sides. (Susan, teacher)

These parents and teachers appeared to worry that the White Pine School was beginning to imitate, in some respects, conventional public schools so that it would not seem so threateningly different to parents unfamiliar with non-conventional philosophies. Teachers commented on how they felt pressured to conform more to conventional practices. For example,

> I'm feeling [stress] . . . toward doing more [state standards-related] things . . . I see resistance [from the parents] . . . to my ideas [of straying more from the conventional], because they're feeling more of the pressure to get other things done. (Katrina, teacher)

> In a way I wanted to say . . . "Just let me do my job. This is what I do. This is what I'm good at." . . . I wouldn't go to a pharmacist and say, "I think the pink pills would be better for this." . . . I trust that this is what he does, and I trust him to his profession. (Susan, teacher)

Other parents and teachers appeared to desire more conventional school characteristics at the White Pine School so that children would have an easier time transitioning to the public

system if and when they left the White Pine School. The presumption seemed to be that if the school modeled the public schools in terms of such things as meeting benchmark standards, then students, when they went to public school, would not be behind in either their education (as compared to their conventionally-schooled peers) or, ultimately, in economic competition in life.

Clearly, fully accepting an alternative philosophy of education, particularly one that strongly departs from conventional philosophies (Essentialist, Perennialist), requires a leap of faith and a deep commitment to the alternative vision. Some White Pine School parents seemed reluctant to take this leap for fear that their children's future opportunities might be limited. Catherine, the school director, indicated to me that the level of this fear seemed to be ratcheting up from past years, perhaps in keeping with increasing rhetoric in the dominant culture surrounding standards, standardized tests, and workforce readiness.

Another possible reason for the diversity of philosophical beliefs is the shifting of players at the school. Different people have different beliefs about education and when given the freedom to express them, they will push for their own ends. Shifting players is a hallmark of any school. Parents leave as their children leave, and teachers leave for a variety of reasons, thus opening spaces for new decision-makers/ "governors." Without firm governance structures in place and clear documentation of past and present identity, this natural shifting of participants will result in a lack of consistency in vision and identity. This is the state of affairs found at the White Pine School.

The school's main governance structure is "Parent Council," made up of one representative from each classroom, along with one teacher member, and the school director. Parent Council is charged with "taking responsibility for the overall well being [sic] of the White Pine School in every respect. Council is the decision-making body for the school" (*Committees*

Explanation, school documents). All other parent committees report to Parent Council, and the director is charged with coordinating follow-through of Council decisions. On the surface, this leadership sounds firm and consistent, but this Council's membership shifts each year leading to a fluid and inconsistent direction. Additionally, the school director position was a new position in the 2006-2007 school year and Catherine, the person hired to fill the position, only committed to one year in the job. At the midpoint of the 2006-2007 academic year, an assistant director position was created and filled by an individual with development and fundraising experience, in the hopes that she would be able to pick up where the director left off, but, unfortunately, this individual left the job within three months. She cryptically indicated to me in a brief email that her reason for leaving was that "I just did not believe that in practice they were ready for a Director; in theory -- yes" (personal communication). While it was not clear to me what she meant, I surmise that she encountered the various factions each expressing different visions for the school and could neither see much hope for an easy reconciliation or a willingness on the part of participants to be led to reconciliation by a strong director. The temporary nature of the current director position, the inability to bring in new leaders, and the shifting membership on the Parent Council all lead to a situation where it is extremely difficult to maintain philosophical continuity from year to year.

In addition to not having a consistent person or governing body to maintain identity integrity, the school also lacks useful record-keeping of the leadership's past decisions and assertions of identity, records that might guide current decision-making efforts. A teacher commented that,

> The documentation gets lost. And that is a big problem . . . Nobody takes responsibility for finishing off [some] thing . . . There isn't a . . . person who . . . has an interest in taking charge of keeping everything well organized (Olivia, teacher).

While Catherine, the current director, who has been involved with the school for over sixteen years as both a teacher and a parent and was chosen for the position in part for her extensive historical knowledge about the school, could serve as a resource for identifying the school's past identity, she, too, echoed some of this teacher's concerns about record keeping. She stated that, "I can't tell you how many years we've put time and energy into defining who we are and showing the different things. And then because the structure isn't there to maintain it from year to year, some of it's been lost."

This lack of documentation and governance consistency from year to year has clearly impacted the school's ability to express its identity in any firm and clear way. The shifting of participants has thus resulted in a school that seems uncertain about who it has been, who it is now, and, thus, where it should go in the future.

Shifting Players

As discussed above, the shifting of players is part of what *causes* inconsistent philosophies and practices at a school. Ironically, the shifting of players is also a *result,* or manifestation, of the school's inconsistent identity. If a school does not know what it is itself, then it will have difficulty explaining its identity to others and thus might suffer from lack of new members enrolling. Organizational identity theory teaches that for an organization (in this case a school) to be effective in meeting its goals and attracting and maintaining members/participants, it needs to have an identity that has a clear central character, that is distinguishable from others with which it may be compared (e.g. public schools), and that is

somewhat continuous over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Lynn Walker (2007), an organizational consultant, has written that

> An identity defines the edge of something. For any entity to have an identity, there has to be a demarcation line between what it is and what it is not. An identity . . . says what you are and what you are not. An identity that includes everything is no identity.

Unfortunately, the White Pine School is not having a great deal of success clearly articulating to outsiders who it is and what it believes, and thus its enrollment numbers and tuition dollars are on the decline. This decline has led to difficulties of offering teachers an attractive compensation package, which has, in turn, led to increased teacher turnover. Parents and teachers indicated that this decline of funds has also led to the school's inability to purchase needed resources or tackle needed repairs to the buildings, all of which has reduced the school's attractiveness to outsiders.

Overcoming the Identity Crisis

As reasons for the school's identity crisis and manifestations of this crisis are many and varied, working through it will be exceptionally difficult. Many of the interviewed parents and teachers knew there was an identity problem taking place at the school and seemed to be willing to work on it. In fact, they offered several possible solutions to the problem, and indicated that some steps were already being implemented toward a solution . However, other parents seemed resistant to the idea that anything was wrong. In fact, when I sent a draft of this article to the school and the interviewees, I received some very different reactions. For example, the "official" response from the Parent Council was as follows:

> [We] basically acknowledge that there were a few acceptable points in your analysis but [we] found it deficient of all those polled and thus not a true measure of the school. [We] feel that the changes [we] would ask you to make are extremely extensive and therefore will not request any further alterations. (personal communication)

I was extremely concerned about and surprised by such a response. I worried that I had perhaps misquoted or misinterpreted my interviewees, but none of them, upon receiving my draft, exercised their consent rights to withdraw their comments from participation, nor did the Parent Council rescind their permission for me to write about the school (they just asserted a desire for confidentiality, which I had already committed to via Institutional Review Board parameters). So, I responded to this message and cc'd all the interviewees as follows:

> Thanks for letting me know. Honestly, I am quite dismayed about this. I certainly had no intention of coming into your school community and writing up something that you all would consider to be so false and deficient. I have no wish to present falsehoods whatsoever, and this was why I sent you all copies of the article to, basically, "triangulate" my findings - to let me know what I got wrong, how things could be interpreted differently, etc. and that I would alter the article accordingly. I am the first to acknowledge that my perspective on the school is, of course, going to be limited by the fact that I am an outsider who only spent around 42 hours observing at the school and 11 hours speaking with parents and teachers. This limitation necessitated my getting responses from you all as to where I was off the mark. I am sorry that the Council feels that it cannot provide me with information to let me know specifically where I was inaccurate or unfair, but I can certainly understand that the time to do so may not be

> readily available. If anyone does choose to let me know about what specifically is deficient in his/her view, I welcome such feedback.

One parent interviewee, in turn, responded to the Council thusly (and cc'd me on her response):

> Hello all,
>
> For what it's worth, I am disappointed with our response. It looks like we are doing classic damage control, and for no reason. Frankly, I found much of Kristan's analysis to be accurate, and it truly reflects what I hear a number of parents saying who are both currently a part of our school and who are prospective parents.
>
> When I receive feedback from people about myself or my actions that I do not like, I try to use that discomfort with the feedback as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person. We as a school certainly have a great deal to learn, and we need to grow. Here was a perfect opportunity for us to take a hard look at ourselves and grow from it, and unfortunately instead it looks as though we as an institution are not yet ready to do that.
>
> Please consider that Council's perspective is limited by the very nature of being Council; as leaders of our school, part of Council's mandate is to have an excellent handle on all parents' perspectives on important issues. To be honest, I don't see this happening on a regular basis. I think that if the time was taken to share Kristan's article with the rest of the school and to have a discussion about it, the majority of parents would have found a great deal of truth in her article (Sheila, parent, personal communication).

Two months later, I received the following email from another parent (and not one of those whom I interviewed):

> I read with great interest your report and found it to be not only "spot on," but also a positive beginning point for open discussion of these issues. Unfortunately, it was suppressed and not shared with the school community at large . . . [Y]es, the school is experiencing difficult times, and ignoring the salient issues you bring forward will continue to move them ever more in that direction. My wife and I decided to withdraw from the school this year due to many of the issues you raised (personal communication).

Clearly, the parents of the school are conflicted over whether an identity crisis even exists; such a conflict can only exacerbate the problem, for if there is disagreement over this question, then it is unlikely that the school members all be willing to undertake the difficult and time-consuming process of strategic visioning that would be necessary to overcome the identity problem. Thus, step one in overcoming the school's identity crisis perhaps needs to be a common recognition that a problem exists. From that point, the school members can look to school leadership and community visioning research to help guide them through the process of resolution.

What follows is a brief explication, based on a cursory review of such literature, of the step-by-step process the school members could undertake to move the school from identity crisis to identity achievement.

First, the school needs to do some visioning, which "is a long-range planning process which emphasizes shared hopes, purposes, goals, resources, and commitments" (Ellis, 1992, p. 3). The White Pine School must go back to basics and gather some data. It must ask its members what their key purposes or philosophical beliefs are – what are their guiding ideals about education? What do they believe about human nature, children, and children's development (physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual)? What do they believe constitutes a

"good" education and effective instructional and assessment practices? What do they believe about decision-making, power, and freedom for students, parents, and teachers in a school? Chris Mercogliano, in his 2006 book, *How to Grow a School*, speaks about the necessity of asking these questions and looking to models of successful schools following alternative educational visions. He wrote, "in cases in which a school is trying something different in a place that is hesitant to embrace new ideas, or finds itself dealing with doubting parents, references to the work of earlier pioneers can create needed credibility and an air of reassurance" (p. 23). Within this first step, the school members also need to gather data on where the school has been, what it was like in the past, and why it was like that. Further, the school members need to explore what changes are likely in the world and local community, and what external factors might constrain and support them in the present and in the future. After gathering all this data, the school members must then detail a vision for the future, explaining what they want the school to look like, be like, and do in *x* number of years (Ellis, 1992: Peterson, 1995). The White Pine School has begun, to a limited degree, this step. For example, the director position was created this past year for the express purpose of working intensively with the Parent Council to define curriculum, progress report formats, committee roles, and parent-school communication structures. The school also, in early February 2007, disseminated a survey asking parents and teachers what goals they'd like for the school to accomplish.

The next step the school needs to take is to compile the various data gathered and detail a broad-based, realizable vision for the future. They must then break down the vision into themes (e.g., governance, curriculum, assessment, instructional practices, etc.) and develop goals and measurable outcomes for each theme of the vision. After this has been accomplished (perhaps by

all the members or by a core group of leaders), the school must put out this information to the school members and ask for feedback. Revisions, based on this feedback, should then be made.

At this point, compromises are definitely possible. For example, the Essentialist philosophy of standards-based curricula and teacher-directed instruction, which some parents at the White Pine School seemed to prefer, is not completely incompatible with more Progressivist, student-directed models of instruction, which was the preference of other parents. The preschool classroom gave excellent evidence of the effectiveness of pointing out connections and compromises between multiple educational philosophies. Parents who might have looked at this classroom and seen children "just" playing with toys, or beadwork, or paints, etc. needed just to look at small signs hanging from the ceiling around each center of activity for reassurance that more "academic" skills were being developed. For example, above the table where students ate their snacks and lunch was a sign that said: "Lunch, Snack, Cooking" and listed skills and concepts that were potentially being learned through these activities, including "self-help skills, communication skills and language development, measuring and comparing sizes, and science concepts of solid/liquid, change, etc." Near the painting and writing table was a sign that said "Literacy" and listed such skills as "listening and comprehension skills, memorization, left to right progression, phonics, value of print, expressing." So, if parents who want to see more standards-based work and curricula at the school could get help understanding how student-initiated subjects and projects translate into real, meaningful, and substantive learning, then perhaps some of their fears about student-directed instruction might ease.

After compromises have been reached and a general agreement exists on vision, the school members need to select projects to tackle, develop agendas and tasks for each project, and start implementing these action plans. Lastly, they need to monitor their progress and evaluate

their success at meeting their goals. The strategic visioning process is not a static one; so once these steps are carried out, the school cannot rest on its laurels. Rather, it must approach this process as a cycle, frequently revisiting its vision and implementation plans (Ellis, 1992; Liethwood & Riehl , 2003; Peterson, 1995). The necessity to view this process as recursive rather than static is especially relevant for a parent-cooperative school, which, by its nature, is going to have a regular influx and outflow of membership. To make itself responsive to its members, the White Pine School must keep the strategic vision in the forefront and engage everyone in maintaining a strong organization with a clear, although dynamic, identity.

Conclusion

School identity crises can be caused by a number of factors, have many different manifestations, and have a variety of resolution options. While each case will be different, this study can serve as a cautionary and guiding tale for any school that is either undergoing change or seeking to newly create itself, and it especially can inform people seeking to create an educational organization that differs from the conventional. Having an identity that is clear, distinct, and well-reasoned will allow parents to truly understand the sort of education their children will receive, will allow them to see how the school assuages their concerns about the conventional, and will increase the chances that parents will support the school over the years through continued enrollment of their children.

Many of the parents and teachers with whom I spoke, seemed to indicate that the White Pine School has had a reputation of being unique and distinct from conventional public schools and that is why people gravitated to it. This is consistent with a 1994 article in the regional newspaper about the school, which was focused on how unconventional this school was. Many

of the parents and teachers want the school to continue to offer different practices and methods from those used in conventionally-modeled public schools. But a school's vision and mission cannot just offer negation, they must also offer reconceptualization. In the words of dialectical analysis, conventional public schools are the thesis; negation of conventional school characteristics is an anti-thesis, but

> Negation . . . is not itself a form of liberation . . . It is [the] act of overcoming (synthesis, consciousness) which is the critical and liberating aspect of dialectical thought. Action lies not in the act of negation (antithesis, demystification) but in the act of overcoming (synthesis, consciousness) (Gintis, 1973, 72).

While the White Pine School certainly should show parents that it negates normative school structures and practices in some ways (antithesis to the conventional school thesis), it must also show that it is transcending this negation– that it is standing *for* something unique (a synthesis) and is not just *against* normative, conventional schooling.

References

Albert, S. & Whetten, D. (1985). Organizational identity. In L.L. Cummings & B.M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (pp. 263-295). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Alternative Education Resource Organization. (n.d.) "AERO member schools and organizations." Retrieved March 24, 2008 from http://www.educationrevolution.org/aero-member-schools.html

Bagley, W.C. (1941). The case for Essentialism in education. *Today's education: Journal of The National Education Association*, *30*(7), 201-202.

Bennis, D. M. (2006). *De-mystifying freedom based education*. Master's thesis, Vermont College of Union Institute & University.

Brameld, T. (1970). A cross-cutting approach to the curriculum: The moving wheel. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *51*(7), 346-348.

Ellis, T. (1992). *Community visioning: Generating support and action for community education.* Detroit, MI: National Community Education Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 352 715).

Gintis, H. (1973). Toward a political economy of education: A radical critique of Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society.* In I. Illich (Ed.), *After deschooling, what?*(pp. 29-76). New York, Harper and Row: Publishers.

Goodlad, J. (1984). *A place called school.* NY: McGraw-Hill.

Kilpatrick, W.H. (1941). The case for Progressivism in education. *Today's education: Journal of The National Education Association*, *30*(8), 231-232.

Liethwood, K.A. & Riehl, C. (2003). What we know about successful school leadership.

Retrieved December 10, 2007 from http://www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/randd-leithwood-successful-leadership.pdf .

Mercogliano, C. (2006). *How to grow a school: Starting and sustaining schools that work.* New York, NY: Oxford Village Press.

Miller, R. (2002). *Free schools, free people: Education and democracy after the 1960s*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Mintz, J. (Ed.). (1995). *The almanac of education choices.* New York: Macmillan Publishing.

Peterson, M. (1995). *Harnessing the power of vision: Ten steps to creating a strategic vision and action plan for your community.* Little Rock, AR: Arkansas University Cooperative Extension Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 383 824).

Walker, L. (2007). *Boundary management.* Retrieved May 7, 2007 from www.boundarymanagement.com/Create%20an%20Identity.htm

Wolk, S. (2007). Why go to school? *Phi Delta Kappan*, *88* (8), 648-658.

Woolfolk, A. (2005). *Educational psychology* (9th edition). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.