

DR. GLORIA MITCHELL: MODELING EXCELLENCE  
IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*  
(Psalms 16:5-8)

### **To my Heavenly Father**

All that I am and all that I have is from you, Lord. Your blessings abound and your grace and mercy comfort me. While I deserved nothing, you gave your everything! You gave your One and only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, so that I may have life, and have it abundantly. To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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Mesulang! Killisou! Si Yu'us ma'ase! Kommol! Kalahngan! Kammagar! Kulo!  
Sa Hachigchig! Mahalo and Aloha!

~ EHN

## **ABSTRACT**

It is with utmost respect and honor that one would have the opportunity to share another person's life story, especially one that has had a profound impact on that individual. The power of oral history has that effect and allows the participant and researcher to become co-participants and co-researchers looking through a reflective lens of both theory and practice.

The purpose of this study is to examine effective leadership through the oral history of one educational leader. Using an oral history methodology, this research will highlight the lifelong journey of Dr. Gloria Mitchell and makes the argument that the sample of one individual is as pertinent, and poignant as a study of many. The impact of the study will come from the direct memories and stories from Dr. Gloria Mitchell as she reflects on her life and career from her humble, yet formative years as a young Black woman growing up in the Civil Rights Movement, to her rise as a leading educator today.

The life lessons she learned about values, determination, excellence, and hard work came from the community that she grew up in, and the home that raised her. Dr. Mitchell candidly shares her life experiences as an important lesson that to truly make an impact as an educational leader, one must be authentic, unconventional, and ready, have a servant's heart, and to always be present, if one is to lead from the inside out.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Tell me a fact and I'll learn.  
Tell me a truth and I'll believe.  
But tell me a story and it will live  
In my heart forever.*  
~ *An old Native American Proverb*  
(Janesick, 2010, p. 43)

**Fact:** According to a 2013 MetLife survey, “75% of principals feel that their job has become too complex, half of all principals feel under great stress ‘several days a week,’ and the percentage who say they are satisfied had dropped from 68% to 59% since 2008” (Markow, Macia, & Lee, 2013, p. 5).

**Truth:** Research shows that principals are on the frontlines in leading improvement at the school and community levels, but the job itself has led to frustration and often times, defeat. As a result, many are leaving the profession altogether. And as “expectations heighten, the principalship itself has become overloaded in a way that makes it impossible to fulfill the promise of widespread, sustained reform” (Fullan, 2015, p. 124).

**Story:** Despite the facts and truths about school leadership, there are *bright spots*, models of excellence that stand out above the fray and represent the other half of principals that not only *survive* the job, but *thrive*. This research study is one such story. It is a story that will stir your conscience and provide personal insights and experiences that transcend culture and color and will settle in your heart if you will allow. And so I invite you to sit down and stay a while, to listen to some stories between one school leader to another.

## **Educational Leadership Today**

The facts quantify what many educational reformers have known for decades. And the truth gets worse. According to Lenz, Wells, & Kingston (2015), “The revolving door of principals and superintendents continues to turn, while fewer and fewer teachers consider school leadership a viable career option. Thus the shortage of leaders in our nation’s schools and districts continue to grow” (p. 153). Proportionally, women in particular “are still poorly represented” in educational leadership positions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 111).

This is especially true for our current age and stage of school reform. It is widely agreed that “leadership roles in education are shifting in response to rapid educational change” (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011, p. 2). The challenges, according to Santamaría and Santamaría (2011) is the “risk of leaders becoming burned out considering the enormous amount of personal attention, energy, and investment they need to focus on inspiring, motivating, and meeting the personal needs of institutional” needs (p. 3). Arguably there are many contributing and competing factors to “the ‘crisis’ in American public education,” according to a 1983 government report entitled “A Nation at Risk” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 1). The latest significant shift came in 2001, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in response to the fact that where “America’s public education system once led the world” now “wheezes in the middle of the pack” (Lenz, et al., 2015, p. 1). Bluntly stated, America was no longer competitive in the global market then, and still lacks its present potential today (Wagner et al., 2005; Lenz, et al., 2015).

In 2009, the Race to the Top program awarded an unprecedented \$4 billion to qualifying states to once again address the stagnant progress across American public schools. Former U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in his Executive Summary evaluating Race to the Top,

which prioritized teacher and leader development, stated, “To break from a status quo that has traditionally denied disadvantaged students access to high standards, great teachers and leaders, and outstanding schools, an innovative, all-hands-on-deck approach is necessary” (Duncan, 2015, p. iv).

The problem of course is that this is not a new problem, but a perennial one. We have *learned* this all before and the nomenclature may have changed, but it is commonly referred to as the *pendulum swing* in educational reform. Call it by a different name, but it is all the same and we seem no further along in understanding the root causes of systemic change when it comes to education. In educational sectors across the nation, “leaders come and leaders go” (Lenz et al., 2015, p. 153). Harvard professor, Mehta (2013) observes:

How schools are organized, and what happens in classrooms, hasn’t changed much in the century since the Progressive Era. On the whole, we still have the same teachers, in the same roles, with the same level of knowledge, in the same schools, with the same materials. (para. 9)

And while it is obvious that school leadership is inextricably tied to school success, as well as failure, it was not until the 1990s that research began “highlighting the role of the principal in leading change on the ground [level]” (Fullan, 2015, p. 124). Thus, it is clear that the challenges facing our schools must “confront some fundamental assumptions and behaviors about the nature of school, the nature of learning, and the nature of leading” (Wagner et al., 2005, p. 12).

If educational leaders acknowledged facts and truth, it only shows one or two sides of a very complex, multi-dimensional and multi-faceted position called the principalship. Leithwood (1992) comments, “We are learning that schools are complex systems made up of parts with

greater interdependence than we earlier believed” (p. 2). If we agree with leading experts in the field and 100 years of *researched* facts and truths that have been learned and even believed, then why has it not yielded the desired outcomes over time? Elmore (2004) asserts that change does not happen because frankly, most leaders “are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of practice” (p. 43). However, he does concede that there are exceptions:

[There are] a few gifted and visionary leaders who are busy inventing solutions to the problems of systemic reform, just as there are a few gifted and visionary leaders at any moment of history in American education. These exceptions prove the rule. (Elmore, 2004, p. 43)

It is my claim that Dr. Gloria Mitchell is that exception. What are missing in this unnecessarily complex system called *education* are the stories that move from our heads to our hearts. I know of no better way than to qualitatively research an example of successful school leadership through the life of one individual. Because there *are* models of excellence that need to be told, and must be recorded.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that while leadership can be taught in a program, it is most effective when it is *caught* person to person. The need for mentorship and coaching is sorely missing in educational leadership programs today. Research suggests that the best leadership training is identifying an effective leader and “observing” and “emulating” their words and actions (Bass, 1990). Is this training model available to all potential school leaders? Is there an ideal model or mentor program that pairs and prepares potential leaders for the trials and rigors of educational leadership?

The traditional model of leadership that has proven perpetually ineffective is the transactional leader where one person sits atop an organizational pyramid, aloof and disconnected from those working under their leadership. Transactional leadership, in its most generic form is about outcomes. It would be most closely tied to compliance driven management. According to Bass (1990), “Transactional leadership is a prescription for mediocrity” (p. 20). Leithwood (1992) observed that transactional leadership was a predictor of failure in educational reform due to unbalanced “power relationships in schools: relationships among teachers and administrators, parents and school staffs, students and teachers” (p. 1).

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, consists of different factors such as charisma, focus on the individual, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence (Hater & Bass, 1988; Bass, 1985). Seltzer and Bass (1990) describe transformational leadership as leaders who:

Broaden and elevate the interests of their followers, when they generate awareness and acceptance among the followers of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they move their followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of the group. (p. 693)

Transformational leaders with charisma were viewed as “risk takers and they modeled the behavior that they expected of others” (Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992, pp. 307-308). They are “individually considerate, that is, they pay close attention to differences among their employees; they act as mentors to those who need help to grow and develop” (Bass, 1990, p. 21). When it comes to intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders encourage other to “challenge the status quo and take risks. Followers are supported for creativity and self-direction” (Kirby et al., 1992, p. 304). And lastly, idealized influence is “characterized by modeling behavior through exemplary personal achievements, character, and behavior” by the transformational leader

(Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 14). Now more than ever educational leaders must be prepared to forge a vision for the future of students for the next generation. Gardner (1996), as cited in Lenz et al., identified certain traits of notable 20<sup>th</sup> Century leaders. “He found that the most successful leaders, whether leading a country, a movement, or a school, have the capacity to communicate a vision for the future that motivates their constituents to move toward that vision” (Lenz et al., 2015, p. 151).

Naturally, there will always be a need for accountability and the bottom line when it comes to school leadership. In fact, “The everyday acts of leadership—organizing, clarifying roles, scheduling, and providing resources—sometimes go unnoticed in our recollections of extraordinary leaders” (Kirby et al., 1992, p. 308). But there is also a distinction between “first-order” (transactional) and “second-order” (transformational) changes, which adds to the complexity of school leadership. When examining transformational leaders, Leithwood (1992) discovered that they “assisted group discussions of alternative solutions, ensured open discussion, and avoided commitment to preconceived solutions. These leaders shared a genuine belief that their staff members as a group could develop better solutions than the principal could do alone” (p. 7). In fact, transformational leaders not only encourage ownership and innovation but also “motivate followers to work for transcendental goals that go beyond immediate self-interests. What is right and good to do becomes important” (Bass, 1997, p. 133). And the results? Transformational leaders are more likely to have transformational people under them (Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Bebb, 1987), (Seltzer and Bass, p. 695).

The study of leadership is not a new phenomenon and the continuing debate of *nature versus nurture* is still actively debated. Throughout history, the leadership heroes of old stemmed from:

“The great-man” theory, which suggest that, for example, without Moses the Jewish nation would have remained in Egypt and without Churchill the British would have acquiesced to the Germans in 1940; trait theories, which contend that leaders are endowed with superior qualities that differentiate them from followers; and environmental theories, which assert that leaders emerge as a result of time, place, and circumstance. (Marzano et al., 2005, pp. 4-5)

Bass (1990) has researched the topic of transactional and transformational leadership thoroughly, and even has developed quantitative surveys to measure leadership effectiveness and has found that “transformational leadership can be learned, and it can—and should—be the subject of management training and development. Research has shown that leaders at all levels can be trained to be charismatic in both verbal and nonverbal performance” (p. 27). Dweck’s (2007) work around the growth mindset has shown that while each of us may have a certain “genetic endowment” and we “may start with different temperaments and different aptitudes, it is clear that experience, training, and personal effort take them the rest of the way” (p. 5). Like anything in life, professional or personal, it takes the will of the individual to want to change.

Education is not static and quantitative research has its limitations when trying to describe a leader’s effectiveness as a change agent within a school. Seidman (2013) noted this quandary and the need for quantitative research through “examining personal and institutional documents, through observation, through exploring history, through experimentation, through questionnaires and surveys, and through a review of existing literature.” Seidman also suggests, “If the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (p. 10).



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine effective leadership through the oral history of one educational leader. Using an oral history methodology, this research will highlight the lifelong journey of Dr. Gloria Mitchell, chronicling her life from her formative years as a young Black woman coming of age in the Civil Rights Era, to beginning her career in education, to her rise as a leading educator. The study will trace how her childhood values and experiences have shaped her leadership values of today.

The story I am about to tell will be filled with facts *and* truths about an effective school leader whose educational career spanned over 40 years of service in the public schools. It is a *fact* that in those four decades, Dr. Mitchell has impacted countless lives of children and adults. She embodies and exemplifies characteristics of leadership that are highly complex and exhibits “multiple levels of phenomenon, possesses a dynamic character and has a symbolic component” (Yukl, 1999, p. 19).

It is a *truth* that she is a leader who is consistently the same when it comes to her values, despite the setting and situation. Whether she was a classroom teacher, a social worker, a special education teacher, a principal, a district leader, or coach, she leads with a sense of purpose and timeless values. In a study of extraordinary leaders in education, transformational leaders are defined as “those who were able to inspire followers to perform beyond commonly held expectations” even “able to alter their environments” (Kirby, et al., 1992, p. 303). She has the poise and presence of mind in each and every situation, as though the outcomes were exactly what she planned, exhibiting a characteristic noted by Avolio and Bass (1987) that, “transformational leaders do not necessarily react to environmental circumstances- they create

them” (p. 36). Like a master, she navigated the field of education and approached the leadership landscape “as an art and a science” (Bass, 1990, p. 30).

There is much that can be learned as an aspiring educator or veteran school leader through the life story of this proven leader. The impact of the study will be the direct stories and quotes from Dr. Gloria Mitchell herself as she reflects on her life and career. I am one individual that was fortunate enough to teach and learn under Dr. Mitchell, and privileged to call her my mentor. It is with profound respect and adulation that I share the life story of Dr. Gloria Mitchell for other educational leaders to learn from and grow. And as the old Native American proverb invites, I ask that you *allow* these stories to *live in your hearts*, as it does mine.

### **Research Questions**

Oral history is designed so that the participants are allowed to share as much or as little as they feel appropriate. The questions were designed to be open-ended to allow for descriptive dialogue, or “thick description” as Creswell (2006) refers, and they “add to the value or accuracy of a study” (p. 207).

The intent of the questions was to allow Dr. Mitchell to recount her own life history and the events that helped define her educational leadership philosophy and beliefs. They were:

1. What are your first memories as a child?
2. How would you describe your family during your childhood years?
3. What are some family values that were instilled in you while growing up?
4. Who were the most influential people in your life?
5. Looking back on your educational career, what are you most proud of?
6. What do you believe is your greatest strength as an educational leader?
7. What do you believe is a blind spot or limitation?

Focus Group questions were designed to elicit the most number of detailed descriptions about Dr. Mitchell in her role as a school leader. All focus group participants worked with Dr. Mitchell in some capacity and in various roles. The research questions were:

1. Describe your first impression of Dr. Mitchell.
2. Please share one significant story (personal or professional) that you will always remember about Dr. Mitchell. Why is that story so important to you?
3. What do you believe is Dr. Mitchell's greatest strength as an educational leader?
4. What do you believe are leadership challenges for Dr. Mitchell?
5. If you could think of any metaphor to describe Dr. Mitchell, what would it be? Why?

### **Significance of the Study**

Effective leadership is needed more than ever in the ever-changing demands of school administration. Dr. Gloria Mitchell built her career on putting students first. She did not blur the lines between student needs and adult needs and was very clear in her decision making so that children always came first under her leadership. This was at odds, at times, with the will of the adults, and *so-called* experts in the field, that were more concerned with compliance checklists than children's interests.

This study is of importance and has significance because too often we hear from prominent pundits on the subject of education from the safety and seclusion of the ivory towers of higher education, while the school leaders that are on the ground level, in the hallways and classrooms fighting for their communities, are either dismissed or disregarded. Dr. Mitchell also brings a unique perspective as a woman of color whose voice and opinions were often times the minority, in more ways than one. Janesick (2010) confirms this study by stating:

Oral history can be a key element in documenting stories of those on the periphery of society. Thus it validates a multicultural and diverse approach to documenting the lived experience of individuals and groups and becomes an important path to social justice.

(p. 16)

Learning from a mentor or model about best practices is a preferred approach. Many leading scholars have built enterprises around leadership training, mentoring and coaching from experienced, effective and successful school leaders within the field. It is only natural that one would seek advice from those who have proven their effectiveness over time.

Dr. Mitchell's story is a significant story and one filled with lessons that can be generalized into any field or practice due to the universal mindsets of hope, struggle, growth and self-discovery. Her story is powerful because "exemplary leaders stand for something, believe in something, and care about something. They *find their voice* by clarifying their personal values and then expressing those values in their own unique and authentic style" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 21). Through the story of one person, Janesick (2010) affirms that:

We may learn more about the human condition all the way around. By learning about the lives, ways of knowing, culture, speech, and behavior of those on the periphery of society, we stand to learn more about our society as a whole and more about ourselves as individuals. (pp. 16-17)

As a qualitative study, this research will cover "an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520).

Baum (2007) defined oral history with the understanding that, “The purpose is to preserve that account for users, both present but especially future users, and make it available to others” (p. 15). It is widely accepted amongst research scholars that qualitative studies, especially in educational leadership, though “fraught with methodological challenges” can also be “the richest of studies, often illuminating in radically new ways phenomena as complex as leadership” (Conger, 1998, p. 107). Through the power of  $n = 1$ , lessons from the field can focus on the successes or *bright spots* of certain individuals in one setting and generalize it to a wider audience with the belief that the accomplishments of the one individual is as valid as the successes of the many. The decision to focus on a sample size of  $n = 1$  does not diminish the significance of the study, but rather allows the researcher to dive deeper, spend more time and make stronger connections (Sridharan, 2016).

In Conger’s work of understanding leadership through qualitative research, he provides an analogy between qualitative research and *spelunking*, or cave exploration. The further the *spelunker* traverses down into the labyrinth of crevasses, the complexity grows exponentially (Conger, 1998). In the same way, to simply label my participant as an educational leader does not reveal the deep and complex levels of experiences, forged from childhood, that define the person and offers examination and insight that leads to self-reflection and exploration. *Phenomenon* will prove to be an appropriate description of Dr. Mitchell as we continue in the research, but not as much as what I will write or what others have already said. The power of meaning comes from *her own* descriptions, *her own* decoding, *her own* translations, and *her own* meanings that occurred throughout her life.

## Meet Dr. Gloria Mitchell



Figure 1.1. Dr. Gloria Mitchell, Principal at T.T. Minor Elementary. (Thomas J. Hurst)

Dr. Gloria Mitchell is a decorated career educator, retiring from public service in 2010 after 43 years of teaching and leading, literally throughout the world. Those who know Dr. Mitchell and her lifework describe her as a driven, inspirational leader who is thoroughly child-centered. A former teacher and focus group participant commented that Dr. Mitchell is a “true leader, completely committed to children’s learning, generous, skilled, competent, compassionate and passionate.”

But despite her impressive accolades, achievements, and acumen she says, *Ultimately I'm just Gloria... I'm just Punkin*. And she consistently refers to herself as *just a little Black, nappy-head, tongue-tied, shy girl from Plant City, Florida*. She grew up in a big family of twelve children, with a single mother, in an all Black community *on the other side, of the other side of the tracks*.

Against all the odds, the negativity and naysayers, even from teachers within the school system, Dr. Mitchell persevered and went on to be the first in her family to go to college. To say that she has *determination* and *grit* is an understatement. It is as if she channeled all the challenges she faced, and learned from them and grew from them. One could say that those experiences helped form and shape her into who she is today, a champion for children and a model of educational leadership.

Today, she is retired in Washington State with her husband of 48 years, Mr. Thero *Mitch* Mitchell Sr., the love of her life, and according to Gloria, her *best bud*. They met in Miami, Florida in 1969 when Mitch was stationed at a Coast Guard Base. It was love at first sight for the both of them and they have been together ever since. They raised two beautiful children, Tarra and Thero and have five grandchildren: Niara, Malkia, Jamila, Thero III, and Xak, and last but not least, their dog, Samuel P. Snugglesworth, or *Snuggles* for short. Mr. Mitchell retired from the U.S. Coast



Figure 1.2. The Mitchells: “Mitch,” Gloria, Tarra, & Thero Jr., circa 1985 (Gloria Mitchell)

Guard in 1990. Their service to our country has offered unique opportunities for Dr. Mitchell to teach in several states such as Florida, Michigan, Virginia, Alaska, and Washington, as well as a couple of years overseas in Guam.

Of course, everyone who knows Dr. Mitchell knew that she could never *fully retire* and currently is a Leadership Coach, working with building principals, K-12 across the state through the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. In this current role, Gloria consults with school leaders to promote academic planning, data teams, learning walks, team building, and organizational theory. Prior to *retiring*, she served as an Executive Director in the Seattle Public Schools, overseeing several schools as well as a cohort of principals, including leading several district-wide initiatives in the largest district in the state of Washington, and one

of the top 100 districts in the nation based on size, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2000).

From 2000 to 2006, Dr. Mitchell served in the Seattle Public Schools as a school level principal before promoting to the district office as an Educational Director. Prior to that appointment, Dr. Mitchell was recruited to Seattle to lead a high profile business partnership with a local school where she managed a multi-million dollar venture to promote public and private partnerships in education. She was the third principal in as many years, but proved to be the right person for the job, transforming an inner city school from the inside out, literally.

Under her leadership, her first task was to create a safe and inviting schoolhouse where students, staff and families would be proud members. After basic needs were met, such as asbestos free tiles, new paint and classroom furniture, she focused on instructional practices, curriculum alignment, authentic assessments, and student support. As part of her doctoral dissertation (2001), Dr. Mitchell implemented her school-wide student support system, *Project Succeed* that was both strategic and effective. She utilized her research and practical experience as an adjunct professor in the teacher credential program from 2001 to 2005 at Antioch University in Seattle.

Dr. Mitchell has lived in Washington for the last 30 years, 15 of those serving in the Bellevue School District starting in 1985 as both classroom teacher and building principal. *Life-long learner* is not a term she takes lightly based on her impressive years of service with dedication and devotion to the field of education. Her selfless service to others did not go unnoticed and she was recognized for multiple prestigious awards:



- 1993 West Fields' YMCA Volunteer of the Year
- 1994 Washington State PTSA Principal of the Year  
National PTSA Phoebe Apperson Hearst Award  
Washington State Golden Apple Award
- 1995 Youthlink Principal of the Year
- 2004 Washington Alliance of Black School Educators: Educator of the Year
- 2005 Seattle Public Schools' Principal of the Year  
Presenter at Oxford Roundtable (Oxford, England)
- 2006 Masonic Temple Principal of the Year  
ESPAW Regional Distinguished Principal  
Woodinville Woman of the Year

Dr. Mitchell also proudly serves on leadership roles in several professional organizations:

- Washington Alliance of Black School Educators (President: 1999-2005)
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (Lifetime Member)
- Washington Association of Elementary School Principals (WAESP)
- National Association of School Principals (NASP)
- Association of School Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Her impressive educational résumé highlights her learning continuum and commitment to excellence. Dr. Mitchell holds a Bachelor of Science Degree (B.S.) in Elementary Education from Bethune-Cookman College, a historic Black women's college in Florida; Certificate in Early Childhood Education from the University of Miami; Master of Arts Degree (M.A.) in Learning Disabilities and Reading from the University of Detroit; Certificate in Drug/Alcohol/Child Abuse Counseling from the University of Alaska; Principal Certification in the Danforth Educational Leadership Program from the University of Washington; and Doctor of Education Degree (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership and Change from the Fielding University in California.

## **Assumptions**

There is an underlying assumption that effective school leadership requires transformational qualities and that aspiring administrators desire that attribute. However, it is only an assumption. Unfortunately, there are school districts that do not support transformational leadership values and instead continue to promote managerial or transactional leaders at best. Kirby, et al. (1992) noted that “transactional leaders concentrate on clarifying, explaining, and implementing the status quo requirements” instead of challenging the current system and what is in the best interest of students’ needs (p. 304).

## **Delimitations and Limitations**

**Delimitations.** A decision was made to exclude other transformational school leaders for the purpose of this study. However, because of the nature of the oral history methodology, it is appropriate to have a single subject with the postulation that the power of one person’s story, or  $n = 1$ , is as valid as  $n = 100$  (Sridharan, 2016). Cole and Knowles (2001) understand the correlation of the individual to the collective and write:

To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective [and] that every in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities. (p. 11)

I also used Robinson’s book, *Education as my Agenda: Gertrude Williams, Race, and the Baltimore Public Schools*, as my oral history mentor text as it also focused on one person’s inspiring story to promote a model of excellence in educational leadership (Robinson, 2005).

Another delimitation is the composition of focus group members selected for this study. To begin, the participants were first referred by the subject, Dr. Mitchell. Presumably, these were

all people who had positive and favorable experiences under her leadership. In another study, I may widen the number of focus group participants to encompass a more diverse population. Both perspectives would provide more qualitative description and discussion regarding school leadership. Given the scope of this research project, it is a delimitation I am comfortable with as researcher and participant.

**Limitations.** A limitation that I could not control was the scheduling flexibility of the interviews. Due to travel arrangements and work constraints, once commitments were made, it was difficult to reschedule meeting times to account for schedule conflicts. However, every initial focus group participant who could not participate at the scheduled meeting did provide written responses via email.

Another limitation is the qualitative conundrum of being human. And because of one's *humanness*, responses are limited to memory. After all, how is one to verify that all recollection is representative of the actual events? Hoffman and Hoffman (1994) respond to their rhetorical question by stating, "We think, therefore, we have a subset of memory, here called autobiographical memory, which is so permanent and so largely immutable that it is best described as archival" (p. 124).

So while I believe all the responses that were shared are factual, or based on fact, they are also only a snapshot, or a glimpse into the larger narrative within the historical and contextual backdrop of life. There may be other sets of data regarding a particular life stage or story, but it is not for the researcher to always know. The participants have presented their responses in full, to the best of their knowledge, with all of its delimitations and limitations.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

*The potential that life history research has for understanding lives, be they individual or collective, rests not only in the intentions of individual researchers but also on the fundamental purposes and processes of life history inquiry methods, and on the audience or readers as interpreters of the life history text (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).*

#### **Introduction**

This chapter will outline the overall research design of the study using an oral history methodology. It will also give insight into participant selection and criteria, data collection and analysis, interview preparation as well as validity and reliability for both the research design and role of the researcher and the researched.

The research purpose is to examine effective leadership practices through the life of one educational leader using an oral history methodology. The research sought to understand educational leadership in the face of high stakes pressures placed on school leaders as they try to meet the growing demands of school performance, growth and change. The study highlighted the lifelong journey of Dr. Gloria Mitchell to glean what experiences helped shape her leadership values throughout her educational career. Questions centered on her earliest memories about growing up as a young Black woman in the 1940s to her young adult years in the 1960s. The topics explored include *family values, identity, people of influence, reflections, and lessons learned* as a life-long educator.

#### **Context of Discovery**

Before explaining the steps involved in the design of the study, the “context of justification” as it is referred, Leavy (2011) recommends that a major part of this section be

devoted to the “context of discovery”, which refers to the role of the researcher in methodological procedures (pp. 70-71). The context of discovery engenders a level of transparency, which Leavy (2011) refers to as “disclosure” or “strong objectivity” that authenticates the study because it leaves an “audit trail” from the genesis of the project, to the implementation, to the write up, in this case, the dissertation. The guiding questions used in the context of discovery are (pp. 71-72):

- How did you come to your topic? What made you interested in your topic?
- From what standpoint did you approach your topic? What were your goals, your assumptions entering the process, emotional and/or political stakes in the research, and so forth? How did your status characteristics (such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age and so forth) come to bear on the research process? For example, how, if at all, did insider/outsider characteristics influence the research process?
- What was the nature of your relationship with the participants throughout the process? For example, were there conflicts? What was your approach to the process of rapport building? What was it like to end the process?
- How much personal information did you disclose to your participants? Why?

### **Origins of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine effective educational leadership, specifically through the oral history of an educational leader. As researcher, my entire professional career of 24 years has been in education, first as a classroom teacher, and also as a building administrator and district level leader. I have been in a principal role for 14 of those years. Along my career path, there were many models of leadership, both positive and negative and there was something

to be learned from both. Dr. Mitchell is my first positive mentor and someone I often reflect back on when examining issues of educational leadership to this day.

I initially approached my topic to research transformational leadership as I applied my learning from the University of Hawai‘i’s Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Program in Professional Educational Practice. I quickly realized that the entire framework of the Ed.D. was designed to reflect on an inquiry model approach to leadership, exploring social and cultural contexts. The courses and readings challenged my positionality as practitioner and researcher and the more I researched about leadership, and the more I reflected on my own leadership strengths and weaknesses.

Then, Dr. Warren Nishimoto, Director for the Center of Oral History at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, visited our Ed.D. program to offer another qualitative lens when conducting research. I discovered the power of oral history and the impact that human stories can convey. I have always loved to hear stories about people and places and the bearing that stories can express from the storyteller to the listener. I decided to commit my research as an oral history, with the idea that one person’s story is powerful, meaningful, and can be representative of a larger narrative. In the summer of 2015, I engaged in a process to try and narrow the scope of my study. I was originally going to focus on charter school leadership in Hawai‘i because of my current position. It was a relevant topic and I had access to key individuals who could share their leadership journeys as charter school founders.

An interesting fact, I always knew I wanted to focus on educational leadership because of my authentic desire to improve my craft. But the subject was not clear at the time. Even as I look back to my Ed.D. coursework, readings, and assignments throughout the program, many papers have been devoted to Dr. Mitchell as a model of leadership. Looking further back into my

journal entries, they were also inextricably tied to Dr. Mitchell. And the same question that was central to my research has endured throughout. Namely, *How does one's values shape, steer and sustain a school's vision?* It is as if all my attention to school leadership has always been an echo of the words I have heard or learned from Dr. Mitchell, and it just took some time for all that to steep within my head and heart.

At a pivotal meeting I had with Dr. Nishimoto, he helped me distill some of my research interests and I realized I was choosing a topic of study that was familiar and convenient, but not convicting. Then, the proverbial switch finally *turned on* and it became crystal clear who my subject was going to be! I journaled the epiphany on July 2, 2015:

*This meeting changed everything!!! I entered this meeting with Dr. Nishimoto to clarify my already established dissertation topic! We were going to talk about the technical side of oral histories and I would be on my way. But with each clarifying question [By Dr. Nishimoto], it became clear that I was not very clear... about my direction, my interest or my passion...*

*I truly appreciate the time because it did clarify so many things! The Charter School story is "convenient." It's doable and accessible and I do believe there's a story to be told... maybe by someone else.*

*And then all these alarms started to go off in my head and my heart. At that one moment, it all fell into place and was crystal clear to me. I know I want do an oral history, but not just anyone's story. I want it to be meaningful to me. Gloria!*

*As I briefly shared Gloria's story to Dr. Nishimoto, he believed that there is something there and it could be a rich story. (Noh, 2015)*

Immediately after leaving Dr. Nishimoto's office, I called Gloria on my way home to ask for her blessings to use her life story for my research. She was not only willing; she was *more* than willing to help! In her excitement, she started to tell me of all the things I need to start preparing for the research road ahead.

Then I shared my preliminary title with Gloria, *Leading from the Inside Out*. There was an awkward silence. I came to discover that when Gloria was pursuing her Ed.D. back in 1998, she initially focused her research around the same idea that leadership is from the *Inside Out*. She commented how *strange life is* and that it has all come *full circle*. I also paused because this was something we never talked about before and I knew we were on to something *really special!*

Another decisive moment that helped refine my research direction was a poster presentation conducted in September 2015. Program faculty, fellow cohort members, and the general public offered feedback based on the poster display that included background of the study, purpose, as well as proposed methodological questions, data collection, and results. What I was trying to convey is my relationship with Dr. Mitchell as a mentee, but quickly realized that it really was not the thrust of my research. Therefore, the feedback process was invaluable to my research direction.

### **Participant Selection**

I started with Dr. Mitchell as the centerpiece of my study. I selected her for both professional and personal reasons. Dr. Mitchell as an educational leader, from an objective viewpoint, is a worthy subject for further study because of the impact she has had on every district, community, school, classroom, and student she has encountered through her educational career. Given her illustrious career, she is uniquely qualified to be an expert in the field of educational leadership.



The goal of my research was to explore the topic of educational leadership through an oral history methodology, which included in-depth interviews. A deliberate choice was made to highlight one individual with the a guiding principle that “oral history is the tape recording of a knowledgeable person, by questions and answers, about what he/she did or observed of an event or events or way of life of historical interest” (Baum, 2007, p. 15).

According to Merriam (2009), the “two basic types of sampling are probability and nonprobability sampling” (p. 77). Nonprobability sampling was the method of choice as “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Of the types of purposeful sampling, Merriam (2009) offers further specificity such as a unique sample that is “based on unique, atypical, perhaps rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 78). Arguably, the person that would provide the most understanding and insight in an oral history would be the participant, in this case Dr. Gloria Mitchell, whom I believe is unique, atypical, and a rarity.

### **Special Relationship**

My relationship with Gloria is anything *but* conventional. We are the oddest pair and if not for the important work of education, I often wonder if our paths would have ever crossed. She is Black and the same age as my parents. I am Asian and the same age as her first



*Figure 2.1.* Dr. Mitchell at my graduation from the Danforth Program at the University of Washington, 2003. (Ed Noh)

child, Tarra. *An important note to mention about my sister, Mrs. Tarra Patrick has followed her mother's footsteps and serves as an elementary school principal in the Seattle Public Schools.*

But I will always, always, respect Gloria like my own mother. I used to say I must be her son because she would often call me *Boy*, as in *Boy, get down to my office!* Or, *Boy, don't be late again!* Like most people who know Gloria, we can all recall our first meeting or first impressions. One never causally meets Gloria. She is a very intentional person and everything she does is with purpose. This approach can either drive you away out of your own insecurities or draw you in. For myself, it was the latter and I tell people that it was *love at first sight*.

Like a mother, she called me into her office one day to talk about *my* future. This was fairly early in our relationship and I was not accustomed to being so personal with my boss, but this felt different. In conversations with her, one gets the sense that when Dr. Mitchell asks you a question, you usually answer, and answer truthfully because she is very wise and discerning, and can tell when you are dodging the issue.

She broke down the financial reality of living in the Seattle area, raising children, and one day purchasing a home on a teacher's salary. Of course at that time, I loved to teach and never really did it for the pay. When I told her that, she tilted her head down so that she could look directly at me from behind her glasses and said, "Get real! Get serious! We are going to get you in the principal program. Applications are due soon." Right then and there, she *convinced* me that I wanted to become a principal and I applied to the Danforth Educational Leadership Program at the University of Washington, the same program she attended. And the rest is history.

But even after I became a principal in the same district as Dr. Mitchell, I never considered her as a peer, but always as my mentor. To this day, I can only call her either *Gloria*

or *Dr. Mitchell*. Many others refer to her as *Glo*, but it is something I could never personally do. I think I tried it once, and it definitely did not feel right in my opinion.

## **Focus Groups**

The other purposeful sampling came via focus groups and these can be classified as “convenience sampling” or “snowball, chain, or network sampling” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79). Focus groups were included in the study to offer contextual viewpoints of staff members who worked under Dr. Mitchell. I knew from the beginning of the study that I wanted to triangulate the research with other viewpoints and voices beyond my own. The rationale is that varied perspectives will add value to the discussion by widening the data collection when addressing leadership impact and implications. And as Baum (2007) states, oral history accounts enrich “a way of collecting and preserving accurate information of historical interest from first-hand participants or eyewitnesses” (p. 24).

From that point, I sent out letters of request, explaining the intent of the study and asking for consent. Of the fourteen potential participants, thirteen responded immediately and positively. However, as the interview dates approached, several participants had to respectfully decline due to scheduling conflicts. Every one of them did submit written responses to the questions, which were then incorporated into the research. In the end, ten participants were interviewed total, and four submitted written responses to the interview questions.

For the focus group participants, my relationship with them was more neutral. We were co-workers for three years in each respective site and maintained only a professional relationship. For most participants I have not had contact with them for nearly 20 years. I would describe our time together as a reunion of sorts as we shared stories of shared experiences working with Dr. Mitchell. The participants also represented two different schools from two

different districts. In some cases, there were individuals, including myself, who experienced Dr. Mitchell's leadership in both settings.

All the focus group participants were very willing, in fact enthusiastic, of the research proposal and pleased to be included in the study. One commented, "What a wonderful and worthwhile dissertation topic. I am so glad you chose to do this. And, for future reference, the world needs a book about her, too." The snowballing came later when other former staff members heard of the project and were organically included in the study. One participant asked for permission to reach out to a colleague who she thought would add value to the conversation.

Originally, I considered seeking focus group members who were perhaps not as enthusiastic about Dr. Mitchell as many others and myself who were included in the study. Merriam (2009) calls this "maximum variation sampling" which would offer another counter collective experience of the same shared experience or phenomenon (p. 79). In this case, that shared phenomenon is Dr. Mitchell. Setting the expectation that all comments will be anonymous and that any of the participants can remove themselves from the study at any point was a very important procedural safeguard. Some of the leadership questions were designed so that they could offer constructive feedback about Dr. Mitchell's limitations as well as obvious strengths.

### **Initial Goals and Assumptions**

My initial goal was to conduct the oral history by putting a recorder in front of Dr. Mitchell and just pushing the record button. I have personally listened to so many nuggets of wisdom over the years that I knew others could benefit as well. My assumption was that people were going to love learning about Dr. Mitchell. I believed this was true because I had written several papers about Dr. Mitchell during my doctoral studies. I received positive feedback from

professors and peers that ultimately gave me the impetus to focus my entire research on this one person.

This research raised emotional as well as political concerns. I was not sure how invested Dr. Mitchell would be in the study. How much personal information would she be willing to share? Would she be comfortable allowing others into her personal life? Her departure from her last leadership assignment was a difficult time in her life, and I felt as though I wanted to protect her and did not want her to say anything that would make her feel uncomfortable or exposed. Then I forgot for a moment who I was dealing with. *It's Gloria!* And when she speaks the truth, she really does not care what people think of her!

### **Positionality as Insider/Outsider**

I approached my topic as an insider/outsider on multiple levels. I was an insider in the sense that I am an educational leader conducting a study on educational leadership and the subject of my study is someone who has been my mentor for the past 20 years. Dr. Mitchell was one of my first principals that I worked for since becoming a teacher and personally enjoyed my relationship working for her in two different schools in two different districts. I recognize the inherent bias I have about Dr. Mitchell and her leadership style.

As an insider to Dr. Mitchell and focus group participants, I monitored my voice and how much I spoke. There were many times that I wanted to join in the conversation to add to the memories. During one focus group interview, I admitted that I am biased in my study and that there is a reason why I chose Dr. Mitchell as my research topic. When I acknowledged my own bias of my research, one of the focus group participants keenly responded:

I think being bias means that you have an experience to share. As a valuable experience and how much that translates to other people's experience is for them to figure out, what

they can hear in it, and what they can take with them based on what they are able to be, in the place they are. I don't think there's any such thing about being objective about it, because we are creatures of relationships. (Participant)

I have always known that everyone certainly did *not* see eye to eye with Dr. Mitchell, which is fine. I felt it was important to acknowledge that fact so they also would feel free to share openly and honestly. In some situations, I could not help myself from interjecting because the stories they were sharing involved me, or I had some key information to contribute to the larger narrative. In the end, I felt comfortable with my level of participation, and believe that it complemented the discussion versus dominating the conversation.

## **Context of Justification**

### **Oral History Research Methodology**

Oral history as a methodology is the perfect research method for my particular study because it captures the essence of who Dr. Mitchell is as a person. It allows her insights to be shared, and to learn from them. Her leadership efficacy and achievements are worthy of study and emulation alone. But what would be missing is *her* voice in *her* own words. There are so many facets of Dr. Mitchell's life that can only be shared in her distinctive way. Qualitative research is all encompassing, and according to Leavy (2011) means qualitative researchers are:

Attentive to how research is conceptualized, how literature and theory guide the research process, how and why research design decisions are made, how research is carried out, how ethical issues come to bear on the process, how analysis and interpretation are crafts, and how published research may be used. (pp. 68-69)

Oral history, as a qualitative research methodology yields deeper meaning than traditional quantitative methods (Seidman, 2013). In fact, Dilley (2004) says, "Interviewing is key to many

forms of qualitative educational research” and “ meaning is not ‘just the facts,’ but rather the understanding one has that are specific to the individual” (pp. 127-128). He goes on, “Just as language signifies and is constituted by specifics and abstracts, so too does qualitative research—and interviewing in particular” (Dilley, 2004, p. 128). In an oral history conference address, Baum (2007) asserts that the purpose of oral history is the “collection and preservation of historically significant information, by means of recorded interviews, for use by future and present students in interpreting and writing history” (p. 14). And it was intended to be for all people, no matter their position or status. It is to be an “account of all the people in their own words” (Baum, 2007, p. 14). There is power in that position and a proclamation that everyone has a story to tell, and that their story is of significance.

Van Maanen (1979) attempts to define or delineate qualitative methodology from its counterpart, quantitative methodology, by simply saying they are “mutually exclusive” (p. 520). He goes on to say that they are not only different based on the intent of the study or stylistic expression, but that “qualitative methods represent a mixture of the rational, serendipitous, and intuitive in which the personal experiences of the organizational researcher are often key events to be understood and analyzed as data” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). Merriam (2009) sums it as, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88).

Dr. Mitchell’s life story is so unique, complex and yet simple all at the same time. It is *unique* because she grew up and came of age during a critical time in history that was very

tumultuous for a young Black woman. *Complex* because she had to navigate through all the barriers that were constructed to keep her penned in poverty and in the cycle of racism. Yet, *simple*, because against all the odds that seemed insurmountable, she made a choice to be better and to do right by others. When she reflected about growing up in a segregated society, she did not look back with bitterness. For her, it was the only life she knew. In her own words, *It was what it was*.

The goal of this study was to highlight a model educational leader and apply lessons to current leaders, such as myself, as well as aspiring school leaders. What I received, and humbly present below, is far more significant than a road map to future leadership. Rather, it is putting focus on a successful leader and more importantly, the foundation on which the leader was built. The beauty of the study is that it was not something that the participant or researcher knew, but the data emerged through thoughtful and truthful responses. Therefore, the qualitative data collected, as Van Maanen (1979) appropriately claims, is “symbolic, contextually embedded, cryptic, and reflexive” (p. 521).

### **Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher**

One of the definitions that Janesick (2010) espouses regarding oral history is that “interviewing is a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic” (p. 46). Furthermore, it is an intricately involved process and “when you write someone’s story, you embark on a journey that will take many twists and turns” (Janesick, 2010, p. 105). As a dance choreographer and artist, Janesick often drew from the creative arts as an analogy of oral historian as qualitative researcher. Like a choreographed dance piece, each part independently works together for one purpose. The sense of space, footwork, hand gestures, and rhythm



combined in varied and patterned sequences, to create a story depicted in dance. “Oral history is dialogical. I think it is important to illuminate the importance of that fact. Both the researcher and the researched are active in oral history” (Janesick, 2010, p. 16).

This was never more the truth than in my research journey. It has been a dance between the different interviews with Dr. Mitchell, and we took turns leading the conversation, just like a well-choreographed dance. And then sometimes when topics shifted, the interview dance became improvisational. I recall there were times when I would take initiative and ask questions on a topic that I had personal interest and inquiry, and then she would take the next steps to a faster pace, rhythm and always much more complex.

Many times, during the interview, I became so immersed in the stories, that it made me feel as though I was the subject! Fontana and Frey (1994) insightfully states, “In learning about the other, we learn about the self” (p. 373). Janesick (2010) concurs this tension of reflexivity, writing that “interviewing allows us a great deal of discovery about a person’s life, as well as allowing an understanding of ourselves as researchers” (p. 44). Yow (1997) takes it further and articulates, “As practitioners and instructors we have to be more than just aware of this shift in the paradigm for oral historians, we have to begin incorporating the concept of reflexivity into our writing and teaching” (p. 70). Throughout this research journey, I have constantly checked my own position during the project, which included my own “assumptions and emotions” (Leavy, 2011, p. 140).

My role as researcher was to offer a level of objectivity through the review of the literature to validate what I believed to be true about Dr. Gloria Mitchell. I say a *level of objectivity* because of my relationship with her spanning 20 years. In those two decades, Dr. Mitchell has played the role as supervisor, mentor, and even mother to me. To this day, I will call

upon Dr. Mitchell and ask for advice as it pertains to school leadership. She has this knack to never just answer my question, but instead turns the questions back to me for me to ponder, weigh the issue, and reflect before making a decision. As it turns out, I am not alone. In one of the focus group interviews, a participant shared a time when she approached Dr. Mitchell to receive advice:

So I asked her once, being a new teacher, “How do I become a great teacher? I don’t know how to get there.” So thinking Gloria’s going to know, she’s going to be able to tell me the answer because she knows these things. She looked at me and she said, “You already know what you need to do.”

I remember I left, and thought about that a lot since. Because at that time, I really didn't know. And I really wanted her to tell me! *She knows, she knows all! Just tell me!* And she said, “Whether you want to do that, or put in the effort, or do that extra bit, or not. Really, you make that happen.” I think in a lot of ways, she was right. I did know what was great for kids. And I did know what I needed to do. (Participant)

Like I said, she is mentor and mother all at the same time. And like a mentor teacher, she never gave out cheap, canned clichés. She was never about tacky taglines. Her words were always thought out, always at another depth, and always, always teaching.

Yow (1997) recognized this complex dilemma of how much of the study is of the “researcher’s personal experiences and the research topic itself will take second place in the presentation” (p. 70). It also can be argued that when you are personally tied to the topic or subject, you can be too “invested in the topic, too closely identifying with a person or cause” (Yow, 1997, p. 76). At the same time, one cannot deny that research can be influenced by the feelings we have inside of us. But is that necessarily a negative? By suppressing that established

relationship, “We prevent ourselves from using an essential research tool. And in some cases, the reader needs to know what influenced the research and interpretation” (Yow, 1997, p. 70).

I submit my research with full disclosure that I personally believe Dr. Gloria Mitchell is a model of excellence when it comes to educational leadership. It is not only an opinion shared by me, but many others who have had the privilege of working for Dr. Mitchell and validated through the literature. And lastly, my role is to not interfere with the story because “overall, each person has a story to tell. It is the work of the oral historian to craft the narratives from the recorded memories of those in a given oral history project” (Janesick, 2010, p. 17).

### **Preparation for the Interviews**

Preparation of the interviews began with the IRB (Institutional Review Board) application process. The interview questions, as it pertained to the purpose of the study, were developed over time as the research subject became more focused. I met with faculty advisors as well as a key committee member, Dr. Warren Nishimoto. This was a key resource because my methodology is an oral history and Dr. Nishimoto is an expert in the field. His guidance and direction proved to be vital as I prepared for the interviews.

Dr. David Gaudi, who also conducted an oral history, also gave me sage advice. He recommended that I also conduct a pilot interview to practice with the audio equipment and even more importantly, practice the interview questions. I met with Dr. Philip Whitesell, Associate Dean (retired) of the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, and Vice President of the Ka‘ōhāo Public Charter School Governing Board. As a lifelong educator, and one whom I have tremendous respect, I thought he would be the perfect candidate to pilot my interview questions regarding educational leadership.

The pilot interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and I used the same digital audio recorder devices that I used for the actual interviews. Just like all the interviews I conducted, I took field notes during the session to refer when reviewing the audio recording. The experience I gained with Dr. Whitesell was invaluable and I am thankful for the practice and feedback. It allowed me to vet research questions, provide interview experience, and test my recording devices. I am convinced that the pilot interview more than adequately prepared me for the successful collection of data for this study.

### **Data Collection**

The primary source of data came via one-on-one interviews with the participant, Dr. Gloria Mitchell. It was predetermined that we would schedule three separate interviews on three different days within a particular week in March 2016. The final confirmation and coordination of schedules began in January 2016 the day after receiving IRB approval from the Human Studies Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa on January 22, 2016 (See Appendix A).

Due to the interview timeline with my main participant, three separate interviews were scheduled. This design was based on Seidman’s work, allowing the participant to rest and reflect between sessions. *Interviews can be very taxing!* Ideally, the three interviews should have been conducted “3 days to a week apart” (Seidman, 2013, p. 24). However, given the fact that I had to travel to the mainland to conduct my research, that best practice luxury was not afforded. Every effort was made to appropriately space the interviews over a ten-day window and I feel as though the spacing was adequate and respectful given the circumstances.

I did find that the time between interviews required a different kind of preparation on my behalf. Seidman (2013) says, “Each interview provides a foundation of detail that helps illumine the next” (p. 23). After each interview, I recorded field notes using a *Surroundings Sheet*

provided by the Center for Oral History's Social Science Research Institute, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (2011, p. 17). A template of the recording tool is included (see appendix H). This allowed me to immediately reflect on the session so that I could edit the questions for the next round of interviews. After the first and second interviews, I listened to the audio recordings and matched them with my notes to either edit the next round of questions or revisit certain topics of interest. This process was noted by Dr. Mitchell, as she was impressed that I remembered timelines, events and especially names like her brother, *Jackie*.

My interviews occurred in two separate locations chosen by Dr. Mitchell. The first interview was in a private office of an elementary school in Tacoma, WA. Dr. Mitchell is a school coach to the elementary school principal, so I accompanied Dr. Mitchell to the appointment to maximize our time together. Meeting in the school setting was fortuitous because the principal that she coaches is a former colleague of mine, who also is a mentee of Dr. Mitchell. Because he was unable to attend one of the scheduled focus groups, I was able to interview him separately and incorporate his data into the overall narrative. The first interview lasted nearly 90 minutes. We were interrupted twice during the interview but it did not hinder the recording process.

The second and third interviews of Dr. Mitchell took place in a private office in her husband's real estate company in Bothell, WA. The office size was perfect for two people and the privacy was conducive for a quality interview experience. The second interview lasted for almost 90 minutes and the final interview nearly 120 minutes. During all interviews, Dr. Mitchell was offered refreshments and ample opportunities to take breaks as needed.

Each of the interviews were strategized to build upon the next, starting with life history dating back to childhood. As aforementioned, each interview connected to the next and stories

sometimes spilled into the next interview or continued as the memories were released through the interview process. The questions then began to drive towards her experiences as an educator, both as a classroom teacher and building principal, concluding with reflection on her career as an educator as well as her thoughts about the future of education.

Interview techniques were borrowed from oral history methodologies and were inquiry based and semi-structured, which according to Merriam (2009), allowed for a more open-ended and less structured format to give Dr. Mitchell the ability to “define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). Questions were broad and encompassing as well as specific and detailed as needed. The goal of every interview was to allow the subject to draw deeply into the descriptions and offer insight to her ideas. It was important that I gave every opportunity for Dr. Mitchell to share about her life stories and educational experience.

### **Focus Groups**

In addition to the single subject oral history approach, I was given IRB approval to also conduct focus groups. Focus group participation is unique from a one-on-one interview because the focus group participants not only listen to others responding to the same question, but add additional thoughts based on what others share (Merriam, 2009). I have discovered that this approach does not limit the study, but rather enhances it because though it was not a participant’s original thought, it can serve as a primer for thought and can validate a memory or experience. Many times throughout the focus group interviews, one participant shared their personal, intimate story, only to learn that it is also a shared experience. These phenomena happened quite often throughout this research process.

In total, two focus groups and one individual interview was facilitated by the researcher. Two focus groups represented two different schools in two different districts, which Dr. Mitchell

was the principal. The rationale was to gain perspectives from other individuals who also worked with the subject. An additional individual interview was conducted because of scheduling conflicts. All participants understood that their responses would be confidential through a signed anonymity agreement.

The focus groups were also coordinated via email during the same time that IRB was approved and three distinct groups emerged, and interview locations:

- Focus Group 1 – School A Participants
  - Public library (meeting room)
- Focus Group 2 – School B Participants
  - Private residence (participant hosted)
- Individual responses – School A and B Participants
  - Email correspondence

The two focus group interview settings were set in very different surroundings, one in a public library and the other in a private residence. Though the public library focus group was in a private room, it was not an ideal setting. One wall was made of glass and looked out to the main library area. In addition, the room construction made the audio recording challenging and food was not allowed. The second focus group was also going to be in a library in a different city until one of the participants offered her home. Of the two settings, it is my opinion that the home offered certain warmth both in comfort and sound quality. For future consideration, I would definitely try to arrange the interview venues to be in a home or find other public accommodations that have better acoustics and allows refreshments.

### **Post Interview**

After each interview session, I used an oral history protocol and recollected post-interview field notes and reflections. For the individual interviews, I was able to track questions that I did not ask because the conversation steered away from the topic, or felt as though I could

pick up the topic at a later time. As a researcher, the reflection after each interview was an important step as it served as a written record as well as road map or guide to the next interview. The notes were compiled using the *Surroundings Sheet*, similar to the process used for the main subject interview (See Appendix H).

All data was collected with two digital tape recorders for redundancy. The interviews were then transcribed and edited for accuracy before submitting to participants for member check. The three main interviews of Dr. Mitchell were sent to a transcription service for expediency. Overall, I was very pleased with the accuracy of the transcription as well as turnaround time. The transcription service eliminated extraneous words, such as *ah* or *um* as well as repeated words that started a sentence, but did not add to the content. Next, per the “audio review” protocol, as referred by the Center for Oral History (2011), I checked “the transcript so that it corresponds to what has been said and reflects the interviewee’s style of speech” (p. 13).

I personally transcribed the focus group interviews and edited for accuracy following the same protocol previously described. If I felt that a repeated phrase added to the context of the statement, I later added it for style purposes. The real value came later when I repeatedly listened to the interviews with the transcription. There were certain inflections, tones, or pauses that gave rich description and context that might have been lost if just reading the script. Whether the audio interviews were serviced or personally transcribed, each transcription was edited for accuracy and readability. Jones (2004) described this phase as a process:

Between the oral interview and the written manuscript is a long, meandering journey in which a narrative is crafted. The oral history interview is the starting point in the process of creating the narrative, but the journey continues through transcribing and editing to publication. (p. 24)



The next step in the process proved to be the most challenging for me personally. I had the daunting task of taking all the raw data from Dr. Mitchell, as well as the focus group members, and making decisions on what to include, and what *not* to include in the final dissertation. My argument throughout the study is that Dr. Mitchell is a co-researcher and co-author in this endeavor. To edit her words, her stories, her memories, theories, and philosophies seemed presumptuous and disrespectful at the very least. I cannot deny my own biases and influences to which Hammond and Sikka (1996) say are “always there but rarely explicitly acknowledged” (p. 86). Traditionally, the approach to research begins with “the very choice of the topic, research methods, questions for interview or questionnaire, hypotheses and conclusions [which] are all dependent on the subjective feelings of the researcher” (Hammond & Sikka, 1996, p. 86). But I was determined to make my research different. From a grounded theory approach, I wanted “to discover original theoretical statements (hunches, arguments, positions, premises, hypotheses) with which to interpret the research findings” (Ingersoll & Ingersoll, 1987, p. 91). Therefore, the data gathering, in all its forms, was an iterative process of reflection and reflexive interpretation.

With that understanding, I focused at times on the intent of the message versus the verbatim order in which Dr. Mitchell spoke. For example, there were several instances over the course of three interviews that Dr. Mitchell described the characteristics of her mother. Shared separately, I felt that it did not portray the beauty and grace and most importantly, the affection she had for her mother. Therefore, I arranged Dr. Mitchell’s sentences and phrases of her mother *in her own words* and restated them into one descriptive section. Struggling with this decision, I reached out to Dr. Mitchell for her thoughts on the matter and provided a written sample of my

intentions. In an email correspondence, she replied, “As for restating, I am fine with it. It reads as if I’m a child again [referring to her mother]. Interesting...” (G. Mitchell, personal communication, January 5, 2017)

In other cases, I redacted names if I thought they were recognizable to the public reader regarding her former role as principal. While she was not concerned whether actual names were used or not, because she is now retired, we concluded that it would be better to err with caution and anonymity. For other situations, actual names were used because it was simply a matter of record. And still yet, there were some data sets where names or identifiers were not included altogether. I naturally struggled with this decision making process because I felt as though I was discarding her history or diminishing her voice.

It was always my intent to share the research authority by giving “space to individual voices and agency in any given context and to honour, not obscure, the identity of those voices” (Nyhan, Flinn, & Welsh, 2015, p. 80). For me, honoring Dr. Mitchell was also purposefully not sharing certain parts of her history. I considered them private and sacred and felt privileged that she would be willing to share. Kim (2008) argued for the *voice* of the participant to be guarded. She writes:

The notion of “shared authority/authorship” is a romanticization of oral history research that ignores the fact that we as researches often “trade on” our intellectual privilege to obtain information. In other words, oral history research is equally entangled in unequal, intrusive and potentially exploitive relationships by virtue of the position of researchers vis-à-vis that of informants as “subjects” of the study with less control over the finished product. (p. 1,353)

The *family* moments shared will forever be something just between the two of us. During one part of the interview, she paused and then said, *Now you need to know I'm going to tell you a family secret now... [another pause] What the hell, I'll just tell you.* And I am glad she did.

Fortunately for me, Dr. Mitchell and the focus group members did give me their blessings to exercise my own authorship and entrusted me to bring honor to each of their voices. As previously stated, to represent an individual that I have utmost respect for is a responsibility that I did not take lightly. Fontana and Frey (1994) understand the complexities and state, “We must remember that each individual has his or her own social history and an individual perspective on the world. Thus we cannot take our task for granted” (p. 374).

### **Coding, Data Analysis, and Interpretation**

Once the interviews were transcribed, the next step in the process was to begin coding. Using Saldaña’s (2012) coding method, a “descriptive code” or one word subject was assigned to the data during the first cycle or round of the coding method (p. 3). Merriam (2009) suggests that the researcher then has “a conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making comments to it” (p. 178). For the first several rounds of this process, I simply read and re-read the transcriptions, sometimes playing the audio from the first interview to the last. Whenever an interesting word or phrase presented itself, I would underline the section and write the word in the margin, such as *family* or *teaching*. The more I coded, the more repetition of words, phrases and ideas began to sift from the volume of data. Saldaña (2012) supports this assertion that interviewing subjects is complex and that “coding is not just labeling, it is linking” (p. 8). It is linking a human response to a human question, and one begets the other so that the interplay is

both poignant and powerful. This methodology again speaks to the complexity and richness of qualitative research, each data point a hub and launching point to other points of relevance and reference.

Before getting too involved and committed to the data, I scheduled another meeting with one of my committee members, Dr. Warren Nishimoto. I was able to share my data and discuss the high points in the research. More accurately, what *I* considered *high points* or interesting stories. We began to consolidate different themes, such as *Identity*, *Race Relations*, and *Family Upbringing*. Referencing back to the research questions and purpose of the study, the idea of *Values and Conviction* became evident in the different chronological life stages of Dr. Mitchell. From there, major themes emerged and I began to look back into the data to code the results again. This time, each theme was assigned a different color and I either highlighted or wrote down notes in the margin. In some cases, some sections had multiple themes that could have touched upon *family background*, *identity*, and *values*. The next task was to group the data together to try and seam the narratives together to convey one coherent idea. This process helped lead me from “the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse, 2012, p. 137).

What I found in the data mining process is that Dr. Mitchell did not speak about a certain topic only once, but repeated them throughout the three interview sessions. And while the questions or discussions may have been different, it was worth noting that the themes stayed fairly consistent. Fontana and Frey (1994) wrote about interviewing as “the art of science” when discussing qualitative research. They accurately state:

Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first. The spoken or written word has always a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we

word the questions and report or code the answers. Yet, interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings.

(p. 361)

An interesting note is that I was not originally going to use the focus group transcripts as part of my final research. The rationale was that the data would be used as background information only. While I obtained all necessary IRB approvals and signatures for consent, I left the audio files untouched for several months, focusing only on my main subject. It was not until I met with Dr. Nishimoto and shared my emerging themes regarding Dr. Mitchell that he suggested I transcribe the focus groups for further study, not just background information.

It proved to be very wise counsel because the focus group data became a key data source to validate and triangulate Dr. Mitchell's leadership style and impact. And the more I began to delve into the coding process, the more similarities that began to develop between the two groups. The only commonality was Dr. Mitchell. The two focus groups provided more data points to work from. In fact, "An increasing number of researchers are using multimethod approaches to achieve broader and often better results" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 373). This additional data set was critical to the research narrative because it became increasingly obvious that Dr. Mitchell's reach was both far and wide. Additional voices further enriched and expanded the conversation, offering other insights into educational leadership. Due to the richness of the data from the focus groups, Chapter 4 was dedicated to discuss focus group members' perspectives in the context of Dr. Mitchell's leadership impact and implications.

Because there were two distinct groups, Group A and Group B, the transcripts were printed on different color paper, respectively. A fellow doctoral student, who also had multiple focus group members, shared this strategy. As the data was deconstructed and reconstructed by

themes, the color paper distinctly differentiated the two groups. And as the comments were specific to each site, it was helpful to contextualize the responses. Later, I changed the text color on the respective transcripts and interchanged themes on the word document with similar results. What emerged was a grounded theory approach to the analysis. The words, phrases, and ideas shaped the data analysis and the “insights gleaned from this coding process” helped me form other data collection and analysis starting points (Leavy, 2011, p. 149).

### **Ethical Issues: Consent and Confidentiality**

All final participants gave willing consent to participate in the research study. Each potential participant was given a *Consent to Participate Form* (Appendix I), per IRB approval. The form described the project, the intended activities, time commitment, benefits as well as risks to the participant, privacy of information, confidentiality, and contact information for further questions. In addition, all participants were also given notice that they could cease their participation at any time during the research process. The same assurances were reiterated before each interview as well as during any correspondence afterwards, either verbally or in writing.

There were no ethical issues or risks beyond the participant’s anonymity as a means to protect their identity. While many of the participants did not care for anonymity, they understood the necessary protocol. It is my belief as the researcher that all the participants shared openly and honestly in regards to Dr. Mitchell’s leadership. In terms of benefits versus risk, I argue for the former. From the onset of the study, I received many positive and enthusiastic replies to the prospect of the study. In many ways, their participation was a way for them to also share their positive stories of exceptional educational leadership as modeled by Dr. Mitchell. Both focus groups commented independently that they have not gathered together as a group in many years. And even though it has been nearly 20 years since we all taught together under Dr. Mitchell’s

leadership, the stories were shared with vigor, detail, and laughter as though it *were yesterday*. And finally, per the IRB agreement, all data has been kept secure throughout the duration of this research project.

### **Validity and Reliability**

According to Merriam (2009), “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 209). This is a true statement whether the research is quantitative or qualitative. In the end, one needs to know if the research was conducted with integrity throughout the process of the study. Arguably, this is even more important for qualitative research, and oral history in particular. Leavy (2011) says that when evaluating oral history, an essential question must be considered. Namely, “Is the research valid, credible, authentic and trustworthy?” (p. 143). These are important questions among oral historians due to the unique methodology of centering research on one individual and generalizing it to a larger population.

There will always be skepticism whether or not “knowledge claims become taken for granted or become contested, and how knowledge claims become trusted or suspect” especially when compared to “‘scientific standards’ in order to give credence to some research and not to other research” (Leavy, 2011, p. 144). Maxwell (1992) warns, “Not all possible accounts of some individual, situation, phenomenon, activity, text, institution, or program are equally useful, credible, or legitimate” (pp. 282-283). He further states, “Validity, in a broad sense, pertains to this relationship between an account and something outside of that account” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 283). The focus groups were conducted to act as the bridge between the two accounts, specifically, Dr. Mitchell’s educational leadership and her impact through the account

of individuals who were under her leadership. The argument is strengthened through a triangulation of data points in direct relationship with the subject. Creswell and Miller (2000) define it further by commenting that triangulation is “a validity procedure where researchers search for more convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126).

The validity of this study, therefore, rests on scholarly shoulders that have reasoned for reliable knowledge and ethical research methods through qualitative research. It is also noteworthy to recognize that “validity is not an inherent property of a particular method, but pertains to the data, accounts, or conclusions reached by using that method in a particular context for a particular purpose” (Maxwell, 1992, p. 284). It is at this time that I once again assert the power of one individual, via oral history as a valid methodology to examine educational leadership and the impact on individuals and institutions.

To complement the claim of research validity, I also offer that every effort was made to ensure that the data collection was done in an open, transparent, and ethical manner. The caveat to this claim is the fallacy of human nature, to which the researcher and participants succumb. I do recognize that all responses, though structured with guidelines, expectations and outcomes, may not have produced an ideal interview. Many errors can occur both by the interviewer or the interviewee. The interviewer can misword an interview question or the interviewee can give a “socially desirable response” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 364). In a constructive response to the Hoffman and Hoffman (1994) article, Slife agrees that the strength of qualitative research is that “data by themselves are meaningless without human interpretation. That is, the human elements—interpretations, cognitive structurings and meanings that are given to events—are



absolutely essential to the knowledge of any thing or any event” (p. 134). And ultimately, all “data do not speak for themselves; there is always an interpreter, or a translator” (Ratcliffe, 1983, p. 149). All qualitative data, therefore, is filtered through the human experience, which makes for deeper learning and understanding when creating meaning, even over time.

Another possible threat to validity is in regards to the accuracy of the data and the reliability that one’s memory is trustworthy and therefore valid. Hoffman and Hoffman (1994) make a case for memory in the context of oral history reliability and validity asserting that:

Archival memory, as we conceptualize it, consists of recollections that are rehearsed, readily available for recall, and selected for preservation over the lifetime of an individual. They are memories which have been selected much as one makes a scrapbook of photographs, pasting in some and discarding others. They are memories which define the self and constitute the persona which one retains, the sense of identity over time. (pp. 124-125)

In the end, the human element, in its fullest sense of the word is “‘closer’ to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants” (Merriam, 2009, p. 214). Merriam (2009) further concludes:

Validity is a definite strength of qualitative research. In this type of research it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening. (pp. 214-215)

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I am confident that the use of “thick description” as a strategy will transfer to other studies as it “refers to a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227).

The data collection and its findings presented are both valid and reliable as approved by the IRB process. The entire study was executed with fidelity by the researcher, and in line with approved, best practice oral history research methodologies.

## CHAPTER 3

### DR. GLORIA MITCHELL: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

*If I have learned anything in my work as a qualitative researcher and oral historian, it is that there is no uninteresting story! People have stories to tell, but very few have been asked to tell them (Janesick, 2010, p. 105).*

#### Introduction

The research highlights Dr. Mitchell's childhood family experiences, that were instrumental in her identity as a young Black woman that ultimately helped shape her values and convictions, building her into the person that she is today. Simply put, her leadership style is a natural extension of her life experiences that will be shared in this chapter in *her own words*, in *her own voice*, because Dr. Mitchell *most definitely* has a story to tell.

I was privileged to see the many different sides of Gloria from school leader, to wife, to mother, to friend. There were countless times that I had a planning period, or a student teacher in my classroom and she would call me down to her office. She would be on the phone with a parent, someone from the community, or the Superintendent, and not say a word to me, but motion me to sit. Sometimes I would walk in and there would be another staff member or student in her office and like always, I sat at the reserved seat at the corner of her desk. *Yes, there were awkward moments.*

I was mesmerized by her mastery of communication and how she could have multiple conversations—with me, the front office, the district, a parent, a student—and put each one on pause until she comes back around with some kind of resolution. I liken her to a *plate spinner* who knows exactly how to keep all the plates spinning simultaneously, giving attention to the wobbly ones as needed and then circling back to each one, giving another spin or nudge.

Looking back now, I realize that was some of the best professional development that I ever received and it was not explicit teaching. It was modeling. What amazed me is that she was so consistent in each of her roles. She said the hard things, pointing out the truth, and it did not matter who she was addressing, *even her husband Mitch*. She was very clear. Very direct. Very effective. I also noticed she changed her voice and vocabulary depending on the context. Gloria shared about her communication style:

You don't have to speak proper 90 percent of the time because you know I can get ghetto quickly. And you don't have to be dressed up with the high heels and make up. You could just be you. And I know I've dressed down, I've spoken ghetto-like, [and] I've split a thousand verbs. (G. Mitchell)

The interesting part of my doctoral journey was getting to know Gloria through the research. As aforementioned, I knew the roles that Dr. Mitchell fulfilled, and many of the principles by which she functioned. But even after 20 years, I realize that I did not *really* know Gloria. Even though she is unequivocally the biggest influence in my life, I only knew some superficial dimensions of her life story and it took this oral history project to understand the *real* Gloria just a little more. I learned of her humble beginnings that help explain her lifelong pursuit of social justice for all. Hamilton and Shopes (2008) describe and define the power of oral history this way:

Oral history is frequently used to promote or celebrate a common identity—that is to say, a sense of community—within a particular social group. This occurs particularly when a group, or a community, has been silenced, threatened, or destroyed. Interviews, often invoking loss, thus become acts of cultural survival; programs and projects based on

them, important means of maintaining or re-establishing connections with the past and nourishing hope for a more humane future. (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. 103)

This chapter is filled with memories of Dr. Mitchell over the course of several interviews. With permission, I grouped Gloria's stories according to themes that emerged from the study. Therefore, the chapter does not read like a chronology, nor should it because her memories wrote her life story as she reflected on certain episodes of her life. The themes are related, and ultimately paint a picture of who she is as person and how those life lessons shaped and guided her on her path as an educational leader. The themes that emerged through the study were:

1. Family Background and Upbringing
2. Identity and Awareness
3. Teaching and Leading
4. Core Values and Convictions
5. Leading From the Inside Out
6. Reflective Leadership

In some sections, I offer background information as way of context, bridging the idea that personal experiences, modeled through life can shape character and values. As a participatory action researcher, I also insert my own reflection to certain stories to add perspective and insight. My unique positionality gave me access to certain privileged moments as a teacher in her school, to fellow principal, to mentee. Gloria's own words are indented after a title or set apart by three asterisks (\* \* \*) indicating her direct quotations.

## Family Background and Upbringing

*I really am just a plain old girl from Plant City, Florida that loved to read and learn.  
Ultimately I'm just Gloria... I'm just Punkin.*

### The Other Side of the Other Side

Dr. Mitchell came from a large family and reflects back on her life, sometimes with mixed emotions. On the one hand, blissful memories of carefree playground antics with the neighborhood children mixed with the burden of growing up Black and poor with a single mother. Yet despite the challenges and barriers, Gloria was a determined young woman, resilient and full of hope, refusing to become what others thought of her, and who tried to *pigeonhole* her into someone she was not.

\* \* \*

I would describe my personal self and family as a family that lived on the other side of the tracks. But we were on *the other side*, of the other side of the tracks, meaning very poor. At some point I remember social workers coming to our house and talking to our mom. And we wouldn't take our school clothes off that day because this lady was coming to check on us. And when I became a young adult I discovered this woman had approved that my mom with twelve kids to get something like \$17 a month. But we were being checked on as if we were getting \$1,700 a month.

I'm number six of twelve. There were seven girls and I'm the third girl. All of my siblings were well liked and all my brothers were into sports. I learned from my mom when my son was born in 1980 that my oldest siblings, my two older brothers and two older sisters, had a father that my mom was married to. And my mom had two younger sisters. And when my grandmother died, she took them in as her own children.

I've never accepted the fact that I was number six of twelve and had moved out of that, and it was okay. I never accepted that until maybe now, and I don't know, maybe there are snippets of times I remember that. But it's like I've always wanted to be accepted; yet I was always different. Folks that I interacted with over the years put me one place, where really I was still in another place.

I never was educated enough, never had enough beautiful clothes, and never had the right shoes, and not enough of anything that folks would just accept me where I was. I don't know how I got to be the little black sheep, I just was. And I think part of it was I wasn't meeting the expectations for a class of kids that were presumed to be college bound, and I didn't fit with my physical features and with my socio-economic status. But I did fit in with the academics. *So how can we rip her and put her in her place?* Don't assume you know me cause you don't really know who I am.

### **Love of Reading**

I've always been an escapee to reading and writing, I could always read and write. I was tongued-tied much like I'm now, but it was more severe so I didn't talk very much. I wasn't very oral, but I was very mindful.

We got books from where mom worked. She used to work for this White family and the guy was the president of the bank. And it was the first time I had this hardback book that looked new. *Oh, my goodness, I'm smelling that book right now.* And it was like the fourth grade book of *Alice and Jane*, was it? But it's hardback and my mom was given a blue one and a green one. There was this little White blonde, curly-haired girl on the cover and she's running with the little boy and the dog beside her. That was my first real reader. And I wasn't that old as I recall. But I loved those books altogether. I mean,

altogether I just loved them. That's one time I never had to fight anybody. I never had to fight over a book. *Oh, gosh, that's funny.*

### **Love for School**

I remember when I was five, slipping into school on the first day with my brother. You had to be five by August 31 in order to go to kindergarten. I was five in October. I had no business there and I told the people some birthday and they let me come to school because they thought I was telling the truth. *I was lying.* But I didn't get put out. My brother Carl told my mom, "Mom, she was at school all day!" "I know, she said you wanted her to go with you." "I didn't tell her to come to school with me!"

Why would they even accept that? Why would they even allow this kid into their school? And they tested me! I knew the words and I could read and everything! The teacher even made me teach other kids how to read. I was doing her job! I should have made them pay me. Then when I was a teenager, I remember going to night school for my older sister who hated school. I would go to the night school for her and do her homework.

### **Childhood Memories**

I have lots of memories from my childhood. We lived in an all-Black community and everybody lived in the same area. The police chief lived... no he was a White guy so he didn't. But the Police Sergeant might have been our cousins or whatever, and the principal and teachers lived in my hometown. We all lived in the same community. And there was public housing further down the street. Across the street from us was a school that was an elementary and junior high. The high school was maybe ten blocks down the road, so you walked to both.



All the kids showed up at the school to play and my mom used to make frozen cups, which were super sugary with Kool-Aid, pineapple juice and all kinds of other things. And she sold them for like a dime. So the playground, like I said, was just across the street, so she would sell those things and give the other half away. We all had red faces or blue faces, whatever color we purchased, and we just stayed out. During the day we did what we call jumping springboards and it's like a seesaw but it was a 2x4 or a 4x6 where you stacked things out in the middle. And one person is sitting on one end and one sitting on the other end and bounced on it, and you bounce up in the air and come down. That was one thing.

We shot marbles. We played *Mary Mack*. We didn't do four square but we skated because there was a basketball court that was to the left of our house, just across the street. I played football, and I was good at it. I played baseball, softball, and at night we ran behind the DDT trucks as they were spraying for mosquitoes. And the girls were measuring the boys and how far they would *pee* across the street. So that's what we did. It was fun too! I had a fun childhood.

But by the time we were about twelve you could be out there, and you could play with the boys and not suffer consequences. But if you went across that street once you turned thirteen and was playing with boys... Oh, no, there's a different story then! You sit on the porch and you watch everybody else play. Isn't that interesting? I think my mama thought you got pregnant by looking at boys! That was her biggest fear.

## Mama

Through the course of the interviews, it was clear that Dr. Mitchell's mother, Jessie Mae Anderson, was a very special person who had a huge influence in her life. As a single mother, she held a high standard for herself and her family, but especially for Gloria. Perhaps more than any of the other siblings. And although it was painful at times, both physically and emotionally, it is appreciated later in her life. Gloria recalls that her mother's favorite saying was, *I treat you the way I treat you, because I know you know better*. Looking back to those times, Gloria reflects, "I didn't quite get that until I got far, far older. So errors that my siblings can make and got away with, I wasn't allowed to." As I listened to Gloria share stories about her mother, there were moments of emotional reflection, realization, and release.

\* \* \*

I would love to sit on the porch and listen to her laugh because she had the most beautiful smile. She had gold teeth around the side of her mouth. She was a beautiful Black woman. I would hear her laugh and hear her humming, and she would always hum *Amazing Grace* like her soul was hurting. I always watched my mom come across from working the afternoon, and I always cried a dry tear for her because she always looked so sad. And I think that some of what connected me to her is I would do anything to keep her soul from hurting.

My siblings were not nice to her, and she was good to them. She made the best biscuits, the absolute best spaghetti meatballs. Nobody had to tell me to wash dishes that night because I wanted the last strand of spaghetti. I remember eating so much of it, and having them coming out of my nostrils! The best! I love her spaghetti meatballs, her corn bread, and her collard greens with ham hocks, and lima beans with ham hocks, Spanish

rice, and garlic chicken. And those things we didn't have very often, so you can bet on it that I didn't eat very often.

You know, she didn't have to keep all of us but she did. She was a good person. Some of my siblings would, still even at our ages now, talk about what my mother did and didn't do. And if they just watched her they could see she didn't have the capacity to do more than what she did. I think she did the best she could. I don't think it, I know it. *I know* she did the best she could.

My mom always owned her own home. She worked for the bank president, so she owned her own home and she had the biggest gardenia. Every time I talk about my mom I smell these beautiful gardenias on the corner of our house of our front porch. And I try every year, no matter where I am, to grow gardenias. I have not yet been successful. Hopefully, before I die I will find just the right spot.

### **Tough Love**

But there are some things... not everything was rosy. My mother really was a good person, but she was mean as hell! Yeah, she beat us. And I felt picked on and I felt that she didn't like me like everybody else. You know, my mom, I don't know what rated you to get a beating over somebody else? But she would. And for me, I think it was out of sheer frustration. Because I was a pretty good kid! I was scared of my own shadow. But she didn't know what to do with me. I wouldn't talk. If the yard needed raking, I would rake it. If the floor needed sweeping, I would sweep it. If the kitchen needed cleaning, I would clean it. So why is that? I think I was like a puzzle to her.

I just didn't know why I was the one that had to get the end of the stick all the time! Folks talk about concussions. My mom gave me those concussions and whiplashes

and everything else. One time I got the worst beatin' at 12 o'clock at night because when my mom came home, the kitchen was dirty. She babysat for the folks she worked for during the evening and came home late. It wasn't even my turn to wash the dishes and she called me out. Usually she calls us, "Linda, Nancy, Punkin, Jesse Mae..." all of our names at the same time. So somebody jumps in and it's usually me because I was very compliant. *I know you don't want to believe that, but I was very compliant.* And I made the mistake of answering.

"Punkin, didn't you know that kitchen was dirty when you went to bed?" "Yes, ma'am." "Why didn't you clean it?" "It wasn't my turn." "I don't care whose turn it was! You knew that kitchen was dirty! You know I don't like that kitchen dirty, and you should have cleaned it up!" 12 o'clock at night I'm getting a whiplash. *Ahhhhh!*

But my mother never came home to a dirty kitchen again! Because I knew better than go to bed with the kitchen dirty because I saw it was dirty. So I would do whatever I needed to do to have things nice and to keep things clean. Yeah, she deserved that.

And my sister and I'll talk about that now. I talk to her every week because for the longest time we didn't have a relationship. I had some real anger around how I was treated. And I said to my sister, "You pretended to be sick all your life and I got so many beatings because of you." She said, "I wasn't going to get up at night and wash dishes? Why? Because you like washing dishes and you wanted things clean. Clean them yourself! They didn't bother me none. And I knew I wasn't going to get a beating." And it's crazy! And I could laugh at it now, but I'm going to tell you that up until about 65 years old, I was still pissed off about those things!

## Special Bond

Through all the discipline, Gloria had a keen sense of loyalty and love for her mother. There was a special connection between the two that bonded them in soul and in spirit. And just as Gloria was *a puzzle* to her mother, there was no doubt about Gloria's role in the family amongst her siblings.

\* \* \*

One of my brothers, who's three kids down from me, hated school with a passion. I mean, he hated school. And if there's something bad to get into it, he would get into it. Jackie was his name. And one day he had been smoking drugs or drinking drugs, I don't know, I've always been too old to do the drug scene. But he jumped off the porch and Mama said, "Jackie, go and rake this side of that yard and get those cans out of there." He said, "F--- You Bitch!" I could not believe he had that audacity! I saw green and I think I jumped on him by surprise. I remember beating the daylights out of him until yesterday arrived tomorrow, I tell you! I was so angry with him. But you know what, you don't say that to my mom! Not the woman that comes across that basketball court with a humming of *Amazing Grace* to feed your behinds with black eyed peas and rice. You don't have the right to do that! But this woman loved him anyway. You know what I mean?

She was a good soul and loved him anyway. She loved him deeply, more than he loved himself. Yeah, I told her she should have aborted them all but me, but she wouldn't listen to me. Anyway, she always did the best she could with what she had. And no other kid ever used language like that with her again. And the message to the whole family became, she might not say much, but she was crazy. So, I didn't care. Yeah, I'm crazy. You name it, I'm there!

## **Set Apart**

During our interview, I stated that her mother must have saw something special in her and gave Gloria resources, or tools, or opportunities to exercise those gifts. It seemed that out of all the siblings, her mother raised her as *special*, as though *set apart*. We know today that Gloria was being prepared and trained for something bigger.

\* \* \*

Now you say that out loud, I wouldn't say that at all. Because you don't recognize them [the lessons] at the time. Now I'm going back to get beaten the hell out of while I was in bed. *You knew the dishes were dirty, why didn't you wash them?* It was sort of when all else fails I should be able to depend on you. That's how I got that. That same day might have been the day I gave her the envelope of all the money I made during that week picking berries and whatever. She didn't care. *You still knew what to do, why didn't you do it?* There were no exceptions in that woman's mind. And I asked several of my sisters why they didn't all give mama the money that they made. They would say, "I'm not giving her my money!" So I didn't get it because you see the woman worked hard all the time. Wouldn't you want to help her?

## **An Important Life Lesson**

I have many stories and some of which I choose to forget. But I have always been a great reader and writer and mathematician. I knew that, no one had to tell me that. But I went to an all-Black school and those folks didn't give me credit for what I knew and what I did. I've always had lovely handwriting skills. But Mr. Bronson was a little, short, fat, Black man who had curly hair who lived in the city next to ours. He taught English.

And every Friday we would have a spelling test and every Monday we would have a pre-test. We had lessons around cursive writing and no one could write as beautiful as I.

But I never ever, ever from September to January received anything but a *D minus* on my writing or on my spelling test. If you passed the pre-test with an *A* you didn't have to take the Friday test. I know every pre-test I passed, and I know every Friday test I passed not with 95 not with 98 but with 100%. But this particular Friday we had to spell words that were four syllable words. And for some folks that was a challenge, but I don't know, I could just see things in my head. I could picture it and therefore I could capture it.

But this day I just have had enough and I walked home in a very somber state. And my mom was there when I got home, and my nickname was *Punkin*. She said, "Punkin, what's wrong with you, girl?" *Gosh, I'm sounding like my mom now.* And I just gave her my paper and I said, "I'm tired. I'm not going to study anymore." She said, "Girl, go sit down." My mom went inside and she came out with a different dress on, and she had a stack of papers in her hand. And she said to get in the car. My mom would walk everywhere. But this day she got the car, and I went and sat in the car. And amazingly she turned left to go to the high school. Oh, my God! I started shaking in my boots because I knew I was in trouble. *My mama coming to the schoolhouse?* Oh, no! Something is about to fly because I must have misspelled something. Anyway she walked into the office and she put on her proper language and said, "I want to see Mr. Bronson, please." And they asked if we have an appointment and my mama simply said, "I don't need one." *Because everyone knew Ms. Jessie.*

So she walked out to the class and she pulled two of the *L-shaped* chairs up close to his desk, and we were on one side and he was on the other. And she took all these papers that she had kept since September with my name and my *D minuses*. She laid them in front of her and said, “Now Punkin came home crying today, and I know that child. She don’t cry often, but when she cries it’s a mess... Straighten up your face over there.” And she looked at him and said, “Now honey, don’t get upset with her. She didn’t say a word. I came on my own, owning the problem.” And she took out the September paper, “Tell me what’s wrong on this paper?” She did just a sampling from each month.

She had to plan this quickly. *I think that’s where I got my little strategy from— assess the situation and be ready to problem solve.* And she went over October, and then November, and then December. And he tried to stop her because now she’s gotten his attention. She said, “Look at this paper. I want you to tell me every mistake she made on this paper. And I want you to go word, by word, by word, by word.” And he never moved his head from her eyes and she said, “I want you to take all of these papers and I want you to check them again. And I’ll come and pick her up on Monday, and the papers. Come on Punkin, let’s go.”

That for me said you don’t have to fight every battle. But know when it’s time to fight and have all your tools together. My mama was a little crazy and had a crazy side. And she wasn’t one who would go up every time and turn around, with twelve kids?

### **Father(less) Figure**

Gloria shared a lot of memories about her mother while growing up. She shared about her childhood memories, the sights and smells, the stories. But there was never any mention of her father, until I asked.



\* \* \*

We were bastard kids. There were a lot of dads. Now here's the story around my dad. *Oh, I couldn't stand that man.* He was, what do you call it when you ran numbers? He was a numbers guy. And on Saturdays, he would run with these people playing numbers for pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, whatever. He would collect all of this stuff and he would come by our house across town. Anyway, I remember this man coming to our house on Saturday with this big cheapy grin. *He had lots of gold in his mouth.* And he gave everybody a roll of money, a roll of coins and he attempted to give me a roll of pennies. And I looked at him and I said, "Really?" And I did not accept it and I never accepted anything when he came around giving rolls. I always simply said, "Really?"

So what I have for him is disdain, is what I have for him. The day I graduated from college he wanted to call me *his baby*. I said, "I'm not your damn baby," and I wasn't. There was never an ownership of who I was by his sisters or brothers or nothing. You don't own me, you don't know me, you're not my father. I don't know you. I told him a curse word and my mama said, "Punkin!" She thought I was just so shy I had nothing to say. But when I said something, it was worthy. I did say "F--- You."

So my brother older than myself, there were five of us, by the man that she loved. The first husband was much older. She was supposed to marry our father. Her mother wouldn't allow it and apparently her mother was truly mean to her, and our father went to the military. When he came back she was married to this old man. So he married another woman. But after a while the two of them got back together but he still had his other family. I have brothers that are the same age as I am and that's my siblings thereafter. Yeah, it's interesting. And we all look alike, so we can't deny family.

## Identity and Awareness

*What was it like to be a young girl treated with injustice?  
There was no such thing as injustice. It was, what it was.*

In terms of identity and awareness, Gloria has always been comfortable in her own skin. During one of our interviews, I referred to her as *African American*, to which she quickly replied, “Black is one syllable, African American is so many more. Just go there.” And so I did.

Ever since I met Dr. Mitchell, her *Blackness* was something that I was always aware of, probably more than she did herself. She was one of the few minority school leaders in the Bellevue School District. And when she went to T.T. Minor Elementary in the Seattle Public Schools, it had a student population that was over 90% Black.

We talked about her formative years growing up in Plant City, Florida in an all-Black community. Other than her self-referral to being *very poor* from the *other side, of the other side of the tracks*, she does not dwell on her poverty, but more so the richness of her experiences shared in her memories.

### **Blackness Then**

I went to an all-Black school and folks talk about how kids of color are treated in our schools today. At some point I want to just blurt out and say it was no different in the early ‘50s and ‘60s when I was a little Black, nappy-haired girl in Plant City, Florida! There were fair-skinned kids who had curly hair in the classroom given priority treatment, and folks like me being treated unfairly. They weren’t White kids, they were Black kids, but fair-skinned. They were the elites of the Black community, for lack of a better phrase. I had cousins who were very fair-skinned and they received that priority treatment. I had siblings who looked very different than me who had longer hair, who

played sports. They couldn't read but they were popular. They weren't tongued-tied and they were given priority treatment.

### **A Right to Civil Rights**

When one reflects on the Civil Rights Era in America, powerful images of a petite, demure Black woman named Rosa Parks sitting in the front of the bus may come to mind. Her intention was not to begin a movement to boycott buses, but simply to sit down because she was tired after a long day's work. Or perhaps it was the stirring images of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. leading the march from Selma, or even more iconic, sharing his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. All are powerful; all were decisive moments in the Civil Rights Movement that ultimately culminated in major civil rights legislation. In fact, "Most early studies of the civil rights movement gave little attention to local Black social movements and instead focused on the ideas and strategies advocated by national civil rights leaders" (Carson, 1986, pp. 616-617). But according to Carson (1986), it was only later that "scholars begun to portray the southern Black struggle as a locally based social movement" (p. 616).

Before I interviewed Gloria, I admitted that I never heard of Plant City, Florida, let alone its location. My Black history lesson was limited to places like Atlanta, Birmingham, Selma, and other parts of the South. I naïvely asked if she and her family were ever subject to the injustices of racism in their own community. And as she shared stories of growing up Black in the pre-Civil Rights Era, I was humbled and even ashamed. However, as I listened and learned from Gloria, she never once was petty or wanted pity. Like the strong woman she is today, when it came time to do the right thing, she was a fierce and fearless leader.

## Let Justice In

What was it like to be a young girl treated with injustice? There was no such thing as injustice. It was, what it was. I think I defined for you that there was a railroad track in the middle of town. On one side were the White stores, and the White folks lived over there. On the other side were the Black folks. There was no upper class Black neighborhood or lower class Black neighborhood. Everybody was intermingled. But like I shared, the principal and the teachers and everybody lived in the same area. The houses might look better than the others, but it wasn't segregated within that place. And so no one knew it was an injustice. Not until I became *Ms. Reader and Writer*.

When I was in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade we had older students who lived in our community who went to other schools in places like New Orleans or parts of Texas. And they would come back and talk about how they would go and eat in restaurants with these White folks, and how they were picketing these White folks' stores. You don't have a visual of that because they didn't show a lot of stuff on TV. So you heard these words and it wasn't until then that I began to understand about the Underground Railroad. I didn't get that until later. But you went downtown and you couldn't go downtown dirty. White folks could walk in with their suspenders on and the dust from the farm, the whole works. But we had to wear our Sunday clothes, which was okay. That wasn't injustice it was just an expectation. You don't touch, as Black folks, these White folks' things. When you go in the store, you look at them with your eyes and if you touch the top of the hanger it wasn't an injustice, it's just the way it was.

There was one time I was in a pickle. And I didn't think it was an injustice, *It just damn wasn't your turn!* I would go to a store and a White person would try to get in front

of me when it's my turn. I didn't say it was injustice. I didn't know the word injustice until I became an adult. And one time one of the women in the neighborhood saw me not letting this White woman get in front of me at the store. I was banned from going to the store for maybe five years. I didn't go back to the store alone till I was like a junior and senior in high school because my mama said somebody was going to kill my little fat ass. "What? I didn't do anything!" "Well, Ms. So and So saw you at the store and she said this White woman tried to get in front of you, and you gave her a look up and down and stepped right on to the register." "But it was my turn!" I didn't get that. It was my turn. "Well I'm going to show your little butt! You don't go back to that store!" So I didn't. And I never cared because I didn't like to go to that store anyway. Weird. It's just weird. *Oh, gosh, where is this stuff coming from?*

And I thought of that because about five years ago when I went back home to Plant City, I went to a store and clearly I didn't have a basket. I had several items in my hand and I was literally the next person. And this little White woman pushed her cart into me and I turned around with my mature self now, and just eased the cart back. I said, "Excuse me, Sweetie. Let me just finish this." And I'm sure I took her aback because she wasn't getting up there with my stuff there. Just really interesting because the mindset, *my* mindset has changed. But that community's mindset is the same.

### **Demonstrating Justice**

It was difficult. It was difficult growing up. Sometimes I think about where I get the gall. I remember in 1966, I was junior in college at Bethune-Cookman. I was a part of those racial riots, and sit-ins, and walk-ins, and stuff like that. And my mom knew I was active, but I wasn't belligerent. Okay, she has this little kid that's super quiet but she

always expected me to do something, and to do it right, and quietly. So I'll say it that way.

So one day she was talking to a teacher on the front porch and they said, "Punkin, you need to read this." So they gave me this article that had been written by a storeowner on one of the streets in our little hometown. And it said something like, "I could give these *niggers* ten dollars of credit all during the month and they gave me their whole check at the end and still owe me. And they don't know the difference." That's what was written in the paper! Get real! And mama and these teachers said, "What are you going to do about it?" I'm thinking, *Hell, it's been in the paper two weeks! Why can't you people do something about it?* I said, "Well, here's what we did at Bethune-Cookman when we got ready to..." My mama said, "Don't tell us about it, do it!"

So I passed the word, I made four phone calls and we all met up at the church down the street from our house. We cannot allow this man to use this kind of language in a public document talking about our elders! That's not okay! The one thing we did at Bethune-Cookman College when we went off campus was we dressed up. It's a traditional Black college, so you wore uniform dresses with heels. You wore stockings; you wore a white skirt if it's summer time, a blue skirt if it's wintertime, and a white shirt. And you walked and you kept your mouth shut and you didn't use any foul language. And you didn't hold any signs. You just did it. So that's what we did.

I knew during those days the Chief of Police was a Ku Klux Klan Grand Marshall. And so we all dressed up and we marched from Mount Moriah Baptist Church straight down the street to the corners of East Laura and Jenkins. And we walked in front of that store and we lined up from Ms. Martin's house around the front of the store down

to the side. And if one of our elders needed something from the store, we had someone whose job it was to go and get it from another public market a couple of blocks down.

And at least three times the Klan car drove by and looked. We think they were looking to see if any grownups were among the group. And they rode again mid-morning and then rode again after lunch. Then about 2 O'clock the storeowner came outside with a sign that read *Closed for Business*, boarded up and left. It never opened again.

So that's the kind of power we had then because we were good little Negros. And that was the only place now that I sit and talk to you about it. That was the only place we had to demonstrate or to boycott in my whole hometown. It was like there was this underground paper written to White folks only, "Don't mess with these Black folks!" I don't know, it worked. *It's been an interesting life to live.*

### **Blackness Now**

I'm really this little Black girl from Plant City, Florida who after 16 years went to college. But by age 21, I had become this White middle class woman because I've not lived in my *Blackness* for a long time. I've visited it. I revisit it frequently, not as frequently as I should. But I eat middle class White, I speak 90 percent of the time middle class White. I cook that way, I live everything that way. But I can't speak for all Blacks; I can only speak from my own experiences. So when I'm talking to folks and they want to do these Black-isms my head cocks to the side, *Huh, what do you mean?*

And I'm learning more and more about that through my daughter Tarra, because folks see this Black principal leader and assume she has Black experiences when in fact that's only a few, just fewer than I. Because she lived totally in middle class White America. Make sense?

Ultimately, I have an obligation to use me as a model for anyone regardless of race. Don't let who you were born to, where you were born, how you were born to affect what you will become, and how you will be. That's not a *Black* or *White* issue, that's a *human issue*. And it's always been a human issue for me.

I become more emphatic maybe when I'm talking to Black folks about it. But Black folk already know that. We know the human condition. If you want to sit there and be somber in it, that's a choice you can't make in my presence.

### Teaching and Leading



Figure 3.1. Dr. Mitchell's first teaching position in Florida, circa 1968. (Gloria Mitchell)

*I can't remember a time when I didn't want to be an educator. I always knew I wanted to teach.*

Dr. Mitchell always knew she wanted to be a teacher. After all, her whole life has been spent in the schoolhouse. It was the one place that she could escape from her daily reality of being one of twelve children. She had a gift and talent to be a learner and found solace in books. It was no wonder that she would try to sneak into school, not out, so that she could continue to learn, grow, and develop. Even when her very own teachers and administrators in her own town did not

believe in her, she was steady and determined. In many ways, you can see that is the driving force in her work as an educator today. It is more than a job; it is her vocation and her purpose.



## Head Start into Teaching and Leading

Gloria's entry into teaching and leading came naturally to her. She assesses a situation, finds the resources she needs, and then presents an action plan. In her own reflections, she learned that from her mother when she went to the high school to deal with the unfair grading practices. Either way she led, and led effectively. And if there was something she did not know, like how to teach special education students, she enrolled in a M.Ed. program. She is always moving forward, always learning. But to better understand her talent and tenacity as an educator, it even goes further back to her high school years and fulfilling a need in her community.

\* \* \*

When I was a junior in high school, I wrote a grant with Mrs. Martin. *She was so important in my life.* The grant was for half a million dollars to have Operation Head Start in Plant City for the kids in my hometown. It was a Federal grant. Early on, it was State managed. *It was so long to remember.* It was in the Sunday paper that communities, especially poor communities, could apply for these grants, to open up Head Start for the summer in their community. And it couldn't be written by a school district, but it could be written by a community person. Nobody told me I couldn't do it, so I just did it.

I went to the library because they had typewriters in there and once I learned how to type I never forgot it. And you know what, my mom went to Goodwill and bought me a typewriter for like \$15, or something. And I filled in all that paperwork. But it started at the library. And you'd have to fill out *15,000* forms when you were all done. I didn't have a bank account, never had a bank account. I didn't know what banks were. And I just wrote the grant. I can always think in words and make things make sense. I can do the numbers. *I'm sure you know why by now.* And I did that for two summers.

I hired my mama's friends. I hired high school kids. I hired buses to take kids on fieldtrips. I managed connections between all of that and had no prior knowledge. I just knew. Mrs. Martin used to say I can draw pictures in my mind all the time about things. I knew how to plan and I did all of those things to make that happen.

Then I find out okay, the people you sent, two of them were smoking cigarettes while they were with the kids. You can't do that. And I will have a conversation with my mom. "Mama, your friend Ms. So-and-So was doing blah, blah, blah while she was supposed to be supervising kids." She said, "What are you going to do about it? You need to tell her. She don't work for me. I'm going to tell her nothing. You go tell her." So I fired two of them after two or three warnings and they went and told my mom and she said, "She don't work for me. You need to deal with her. I'm not in that mess with you people." No, I wouldn't hire my mama though.

So it was a mess, but it went really well. I had nothing to do with the money. *That's sort of how I operated schools, if you think about it.* Mrs. Martin took care of all the payroll. She took care of paying for all of the stuff that needed to be paid for. We had food services, all of that stuff. I did all the organizing, all of the planning and placing of orders, and she did all of the paying. I couldn't spend a penny or get a penny back until I gave her a receipt. But I never bought anything that wasn't bulk. It was all for the kids, for the classroom, for the buses, for this, for that. There was no *mushy mushy*.

I didn't have to do evaluations or anything but I did, like I said, have to let people go. But I didn't have all those strings attached. So I did one component and that was the operational stuff. And a person who had the skill to do money stuff did that.

So it was two things. It provided, *now that I think about it*, an influx of dollars for the community because lots of people pay big money for something safe for kids to do. And I also, even though I had adults, could have high school kids. High school kids could do that work as well. Because during the wintertime, early winter, we picked strawberries and beans and we did farm work to earn money and stuff. There was nothing to do during the summer to earn money. So like I said, up to eighth and ninth grade your mama let you play with boys. After then you had to do something else. So I guess that was my impetus.

If you don't have fear you don't know it's a big deal. You don't know it's a big deal if you haven't been given these internal fears about something.

### **Worthy of Teaching**

When I went to Bethune-Cookman, Shirley B. Lee was a teacher in the Education Department. She was my Education teacher and I became the babysitter for her kids. That's where I learned people trusted me and saw in me something that no one had seen before. They hadn't even known me that long. Like I said, I cleaned toilets for a year but after that year Shirley B. Lee saw my work structure on a project for Methods and Materials for teaching Reading and Math. And every class we had to develop something, and I always developed something worthy. And so Shirley said to me, "You know what, you need to teach these *knucklehead* football players how to get this work done."

And I thought, *Okay, here goes another case of, Punkin you know how to do something, now you go in and help somebody else*. Each one, Help one. Everybody bring your best. Only this time she said, "And this is gonna be your job now." I said, "But I already have a job." She said, "You get kicks out of cleaning toilets? Get real!" And so

that's where I learned there was some hope for me. Somebody saw something in me that wasn't a negative, using my gifts against me.

So that's when I met most of the players on the Miami team, Larry Little... *you wouldn't know him*. But a lot of them were my classmates and they would call me *Plant City* because that's my hometown. "Hey *Plant City*, I've got to get this work done. You gonna give me an extra day?" No, I'm not giving you an extra day. I'll go over there and I'll help you out but you need to show up, you and your buds. And you know what, they showed up!

## **Education**

So my getting educated was about me wanting to be better. My going to get my Masters degree was because I didn't know how to work with special ed kids. I was in Detroit at the time and those babies were coming to me and I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I went to get educated to learn how to do that.

In fact, I don't remember a time when I didn't want to be an educator except when I graduated from college. I wanted not to go back to Plant City and I signed a contract to go to the Air force. And my brother who passed away, who is two years older than me told my mom. I took my papers to my mom to sign. And my mom said, "I'm not signing nothing. You gonna come back home." *Uh uh*. So then I signed the contract to go to Miami to teach, down by the University of Miami at Fairchild Elementary. I had no place to stay, no vehicle, no nothing. And there were four Black students because it was one of the states who would decide which Black teachers would work in which White schools.

## **Teacher Leader**

At her core, Gloria is a teacher at heart. It was her calling from her own kindergarten days, through the teaching ranks, and into the principalship, and district, and state leadership positions. She never forgot the primary reason why she entered the profession. One of my favorite things about Gloria is that she always respected the profession and the role of the teacher. She understood that teaching required hard work, because that is how she operated. When it came to staff meetings, we never met *just to meet*, or to meet some compliance guideline. When we met, it was for a purpose and with a specific outcome in mind.

## **Protecting the Staff**

Well, you know, number one, at the core of the work you would think it should be about the kids. But really it is about the staff. These people come here to do a job, they're not our slaves, they come to do a job. And that's part of that *picture building*. But all of us need that core person or persons to help us with our crazy. And there's a lot of crazy going on at schools.

You talk about all the entities that we had. The staff knew maybe 20 percent of the demands that were trying to be made on them. And my job was to keep the staff in a core place where they could do the work. Meeting with the foundation, following district craziness, listening to the state saying, "You're in improvement." All those things! That's not about teaching. And I wasn't going to allow the staff to think about, worry about, and be exposed to other people's crazy. Why have 30 people crazy when one will do? So that's what I was. I was that one and that's the role of leadership, to not allow outside entities to create havoc in the kids' place. And so when you have a school district that says every teacher will be expected to send in reports once a month on this date, and on

that... *Uh uh, no. We're not going to do that.* Because that's not where we're working from. Tell me your minimal and I'll do it.

### **Staff Meetings**

Whenever I'm anywhere, *I think you may amen this one*, I say give me ten minutes. I only have two minutes of stuff to talk about which is why we seldom have staff meetings. 90 percent of that stuff can be done in writing. You know what I mean? I hate them. *Do you hate meetings still?* I hate meetings. Somebody comes in and says, "Oh, we're having a staff meeting today." *Well, what do you want to talk about? Can you say this through e-mail? Do I have to come? I don't know how I made it through sometimes.*

Well, when you have to meet, that's when you don't waste people's time. If you have a meeting, it's about something important. Even when you pull two kids together or a whole group of adults, it has to be something important. It has to be, *I want to be here!* That's how I think about it. I want to be here.

### **Distributed Leadership**

Another strength that Gloria models is trust in her team. She is most certainly the leader, the one in charge. There is no mistake about that. But she has this gift of empowering individuals so that you want to do the work, and put in the time and the hard work because it is for the students. And it is very clear that she will not expect anything from anyone unless she is willing to do the job first herself.

I will never forget one time something needed to be cleaned up in the main hallway. *Gloria liked everything to be clean and proper.* So when she saw a mess, the first thing she did was grab a broom, *not* call for a custodian. And while she was sweeping up and down the halls,

someone entered the building and was fairly rude to her because he thought she was the janitor, and needed to speak to the principal. Imagine his surprise when she came walking into her office to address the gentlemen. It was a classic example that she was willing to do anything on behalf of the students and the school.

When it comes to curriculum and instruction, she is no different. As a master teacher herself, she can walk into any classroom, in any grade level and put on a teaching clinic. When it comes to developing a school action plan, she can do it with ease because of her systems thinking approach to education. But she also knows that it is not all about her. She understands the power of a team and how each member has a vital role in the success of a school.

\* \* \*

Now an example might be when my direct supervisor would come to the school. I don't know if you remember this, but she would come and she says, "Now, can we talk a little bit about Math?" And I say, "Certainly. Excuse me for a moment." And I would go to the desk and I would call upstairs and ask somebody to cover Ms. Maynard's class and nobody would ask why. They would just say, okay, because everybody taught math at the same time. And so I would call Wendy and say, "Wendy, I need you to bring the Math notebook down. While you're at it, bring the school improvement notebook with you too." Because she was the manager.

So my supervisor would be there and Wendy would come in and I would go out. She says, "Excuse me, but we've got to answer these questions." I tell her, "I know, but she's the manager. She knows more about it than I do. She just tells me my part." And so I think for a while my supervisor was shocked by that.

But that's what real leadership is about and real empowerment is about. Why should I have to manage all of that? My brain is the same size as everybody else's! A principal's brain doesn't grow because they get a new job! It remains the same size. So Wendy was the manager of Math and of school improvement, so Wendy had to have that conversation with my supervisor. So that's how I made it through. Those folks who could take care of it in a manner that I wanted it.

Now don't think I just gave it to folks to manage all of that. I absolutely trained them the way I wanted it done. Absolutely without a doubt. And if they fell short, I would pull them back and had conversations and went from there. I could tell you everything that went on, I just didn't have to manage it. That's how it works.

### **Core Values and Convictions**

*I'm a lot of things: I'm wild, I'm loud, and I'm energetic. But I am never ever dishonest or intentionally hurtful. And I won't allow someone else to force me into that position.*

Gloria is always straightforward and always has been. You always know where she stands on an issue. You also know where you stand with her. You were either with her all the way, or not. Many would say that she led from her heart, *for better or for worse*. Better, if you were the one she was championing and supporting. Worse, if you were the one harming another individual, especially children. Gloria has zero tolerance for adults who have ill intentions for others.



## **Grit and Perseverance**

Gloria is a determined person and when she sets her mind on something, it is as good as done. But where does she get her drive? How is she able to stay so focused over the span of her career and not compromise her core values in all of her professional settings? There has been much discussion that leaders are made, not born. Life experiences shape our character and set values that guide how we interact with our environment. Understanding that, the stories that Gloria shares are glimpses into her past, that helps navigate her present.

\* \* \*

I recall one incident in particular that really sort of carved my adamancy about what I will and won't take anymore. I was a senior in high school; I had applied to go to Bethune-Cookman College. Don't ask me how I had the impetuous for that, I've always known I was going to that college. I didn't have a penny to go with, but I knew I was going. And I was sitting in Algebra class and we lived two houses down from the principal of the high school. He walked in the second day of the school year and said to me, "Get your little ass out of here. You know you're not going to college. Get out of here!"

And I'd been in general Math for three straight years, aced every assignment and every test. So going to Algebra was the next step because I needed that to go to college. And when I was taken out of that class, numbers and Math just escaped me and I refused to engage again. Except for my refusal, I did match my requirements for college. So I went to college my first year with minimum prerequisites for college Math.

## No Compromise

If there is one quality that most people can agree about Gloria, whether you agreed with Gloria or not, is that she does not compromise. For her, it is a very clear line between what is right, fair and what is best for students. I asked her once where she got that sense of righteousness or sense of duty. She said, “It was just about doing the right thing.” She remembers a time as a first year teacher when those convictions would be put to the test.



Figure 3.2. Dr. Mitchell featured on the Sunday cover of the Seattle Times. (Tom Reese)

## Excuse Me!

I was in my very first year as a teacher at an elementary school in Miami, down the street from the University of Miami. I went to this principal because it was time for assessments and to talk about one of my students, Donna. *Don't ask me how I remember her name.* This girl's dad was a judge, and she had of course a Black nanny. I say of course because that was the time in 1967. Donna didn't come to school frequently. On her report cards I was putting *Cs* and *Ds* on it. And during that time we had to turn report cards in as we were taking assessments. It was our test of achievement, that's what they were. *Oh, my goodness! My daughter would be so surprised I'm opening up these files.*

The principal called me into her office. She is a very tall striking woman. This was like in late March, early April. And she said, “Ms. Smith have a seat.” I did. She then laid all the report cards out. “These are just fine, but I saw Donna’s report card. I just

need to say to you we don't give these kind of grades to our children." Mind you I'm the only Black thing in this whole school, right. "Excuse me," I said.

Now you remember, I've never been around White folks where you can talk back to them. Then she said, "Now you will take these *Cs* and *Ds* off of Donna's card and we will just redo another card because this is like next to the last marking period. And you will change these, and we will make this look like this. It's okay, we'll just have to do another report card and just say it got spoiled in some way." I just listened and looked and then she said, "Now about this test... Remember you had to answer with a little dots and lines. Now you need to take this answer sheet and you need to cross over and make sure she gets enough to get 85."

You asked about me speaking up. That's when I learned how to do it. On that day I said to this White woman, when I never so much as had interactions big time with White folk even at Bethune-Cookman where most were Black teachers and a few Cuban folks. But that was different. And I said, "Excuse me?!?!?" I think more than three times I said that. "Excuse me! You're expecting me to change a report card and to change the assessment?" She answered, "Yes, that's correct." And I said I will do neither and I pushed them over to her. And she said, "Oh, yes, you shall."

I said, "Let me tell you something!" I remember giving her this lesson. I said, "Every year in my high school we received used books from Plant City High School. They had fingerprints and eraser residue in the books, and they were stamped *NEW*. That's what I've experienced in my life. And I'm the only Black person in this school and you're telling me not only do we have to get your used books, but the way you got ahead was by changing scores? I will not be used that way!"

And I said, “I want a form signed so I can transfer out of this school at the end of this school year.” And I walked out of her office and I left everything there. I never talked to her again, or about that incident. That was a realization for me that drove me to the other side. To the *dark side* [laughter].

### **Finding my Voice**

Of course the *dark side* Gloria was referring to is her resolve to fight for what is right and to not go along with the status quo. The conviction to champion for what is right may have started in Plant City, Florida but developed throughout her career. Her voice was found as she stood in the gap for students. She also expressed her voice and concern to her superiors. In Gloria’s mindset, *right is right* and it does not really matter who you are.

\* \* \*

We went to Guam because of Mitch. And I opened up a preschool at a church. There was this little boy who was the nephew of the Mayor, and that was when everyone knew everyone because the island was this big [gestures with hands]. The Mayor lived up in this house and we lived three houses down from him. And there was this little kiddo who was *off the hook*. But he would be what we call *normal* nowadays. He was just more active than the rest of the community, which was more laid back. It was somewhat like Hawai‘i, but ten steps back. One of his uncles was a doctor and they put him on *Ritalin*. And that baby came to school one day, and I mean he was like he was in another world. And that’s another step into my finding my voice.

Don’t ask me how I knew how to do this, but I organized a team meeting to have a conversation around the child. His mom was there, who was an older woman, as I recall. The doctor showed up, the teacher aid and myself. And that’s when I voiced it, and

I said, “What you’re doing is inappropriate. This baby cannot function on a daily basis. Yes, he is running wild but if you let him run wild here six hours a day he’ll be calm when he gets home. But he’s not wild, he’s just energetic.” It was like he was out of the box. Honestly, this baby was being drugged up through synthetic drugs when he didn’t need to be. He just needed to have some space to be himself.

So that was another incident of my speaking up for myself and not seeing that there’s a line between who you can talk to. I don’t see that. I might not have had the experiences, but bring to the table whomever needs to be brought to the table so we can all talk about it once. You know, how I hate repeating myself. *What part of what I said didn’t you get?* So that was another example of finding my voice. But no matter what you do, tell the truth. It doesn’t have to always be politically correct, it doesn’t have to be flattering, but it does have to be truthful.

## **Speaking Up**

Once there was a new Superintendent and he came in like I behaved. So I knew his actions. He was a *bully*. And so there it was, a *bully* meeting a *bully*. All these folks, all these educated folks sitting around saying, “Yes master, yes master.” Then you have this one and only Black principal going, “What the hell are you talking about?” He came into the district and said, “You will do 120 teacher evaluations, and you will...” “Are you out of your freaking mind?” All the other principals were just sitting there and I’m like, “Wait a damned minute! You people better speak up! This is about our workload here.”

And you know I’m in a school where 90% of my time was around supporting kids so I don’t have time to do that many observations. I’m in every classroom, every day. And I said to the Superintendent, “You show me how that’s going to be done and I’ll do

it. I say you send someone over to my school to deal with some of these behaviors, and I'll do it. But otherwise, *hell no*. You're not going to get 110 or 90 evaluations the first year from me. I don't have time to do that and teach teachers at the same time."

By the end of February I had like a 160 evaluations completed because it was a simple form. The prompts were: *What are you doing? What's the lesson you're going to teach? What's the evidence that you taught it? And, what are the outcomes and how are you going to assess kids who didn't meet the competency?* That's right down my alley! That's all I've been doing anyway. So now he's asking me to record it, right?

So by the end of February, the first of March he comes over to my school. He and I were like oil and vinegar, but yet there was butter mixing us together, and we really liked each other. He said, "How many evaluations have you done so far?" I said, "I don't know, and I don't give a crap." So he pulled out a monitor sheet, and he had everybody over here like at 25 or 35 observations, and I'm way over there with 160 or something. He said, "That's your record of doing the damn thing!" I said, "Hey, back off. This is just what I've been doing and I'm just writing it down." I went, "How many have I done? Oh, my goodness, way to go, Gloria!" He laughed, I laughed, and we kept going.

And we sat and we talked and it became clear to me. I said to him, "I've been doing this very same thing since the beginning of the school year, I just didn't use this form." The form just made me keep a record. It made less work because there were four clear questions supported by the district. So the teachers could run to the union if they want. I could call the Superintendent to take care of that. See what I'm saying? So my workload was actually cut down in half in the end. I didn't have to have meetings with unions. I could have a ten-minute conversation right after the eval. It was perfect for me.

## Out of the Box Social Justice

My sister Barbara, she died three years ago now. But I had her daughter, Greta, living with us at one point when we were in Detroit. She's a little older than Tarra. But I discovered something that drove me to my adamancy about what's right and fair. I'd gone home and my niece was going to summer school. So I went up to see her in the schoolhouse, and you know those big old carts that refrigerators come in? When they used to bring them to your houses in those big old boxes? That was where she worked every day in school. I lost it.

I was a teacher in Detroit at the time. I didn't *lose it*, I mean, getting *crazy*. But I went straight to the office and said, "I want her records here and now." "Well, we'll give that..." "Uh huh, I'm not going to talk to you lady. I need this child's records because she's not coming back here." I hadn't talked to my sister or anything. Greta wasn't upset, I was upset! And at this time they had Black kids and White kids go to school together. And she was like that little boy in Guam who had nothing wrong with him, but just needed space to grow. So you can imagine, she's a first grader, she wasn't tongue-tied, but she had some issues. But she was a beautiful little Black girl. She still is a beautiful Black woman now.

I went to my sister and said, "Tell me about Greta working in this refrigerator box every day." "Well, you know, Greta won't be quiet so..." Oh my God I'm dealing with total ignorance all around here. The mom is aiding and abetting this stuff and I said, "Well, I'm going to take her with me. Can she go to Detroit and live with me?" Greta said yes.

So my sister and I sat and talked for a bit and I discovered something in our conversation. I read the report card on this stuff and that's how it happened. I said to my sister, "When they wrote this about Greta what did you say and do?" "I don't know what that said, I haven't read it myself." *You know report cards are written on a third grade level, right?* My sister who was Ms. Majorette in the Band, Ms. Basketball, Ms. Soccer, Ms. Everything... could not read. Could not read! And as a result, my niece was mistreated in the school with her permission.

See, I didn't just *become* evil; I was *trained* to become evil. I was trained to be this way. You talk about social justice. You have to just come to your senses and ask if your heart allows you to do this? How do we let our hearts beat at an even pace and go to sleep at night and not have the picture of a child in a refrigerator box? How do we do that and not see a six-year-old baby, sitting at a desk nearly drooling, when his natural state is just fun and excitement? How do we do that?

### **Protecting the Right to Learn**

I think my first principalship, *I'll be honest*, I went in believing that my having been a teacher was the *Hoorah* for leading the school. And like the American Federation of Teachers, I believed that every teacher is a good teacher. I believed that, they might have been cranky and cantankerous and all that, but we all do good work. Until I started to walk in every classroom and discovered, *oh my goodness*, there are babies in this particular school that's being emotionally abused. There are students that are being denied an education, that are being brainwashed every day in the classroom. And naïve me thought, *why not let people know that?*



I started with a Black teacher and a White teacher who team-taught. When I began this work as a leader, it was at the end of the Vietnam War and a lot of young men were still coming home crippled from war. And this White teacher had issues because her baby had been either killed or damaged in the war whatever, or family members. And guess who she had in her classroom? Vietnamese students! And no work was done to ready these adults for the influx of people that were coming in that were identified on every TV station and every radio as *the enemy*. She was the rudest woman. It was heartbreaking. I'm going to be honest, I cried when I went in that team teachers' room for the first time and saw what these two highly incompetent adults were doing.

Number one she talked all nasally, and the kids had to listen to it all day. And they had a ditto package they had to do, but she would never shut up so they could do it. So for 45 minutes I sat in her room listening to her talk like that and these babies were sitting there listening to that. It was heartbreaking. And if *my* skin was crawling? What was going on with those kids?

And in the other room there was crap everywhere with the same packet. And kids up and down, in and out... And 90 percent of them didn't understand what was being said. So I thought okay, I left them a note, "Thank you for allowing me to come into your classroom. Can we have a conversation this afternoon? You can come separately or together, either way."

They knew what they were doing was inappropriate but naïve me thought they were going to come into the office to sit so we can talk. No, they came in, and there was a union person. So I asked, "How can I help you?" "Well, I'm here to represent my members." I said, "Your members? My teachers? I don't think I called you. When I need

you I'll..." "Well, they have a right to have someone here representing them." "Well, do I need someone here representing me to have this conversation?" I'm confused. You know, I'm confused. I would never do that. I'd just walked out of the teaching core.

So the union person says to me well, "What's your next step?" I said, "My next step is to work with the two of them around developing lesson plans that are relevant to what it is they want to teach. And to reorganize those classrooms so kids are talking instead of the adults." I said here are my notes. And I had made copies for them and myself and I gave them mine. I said there were no student voices anywhere in here. Now I knew that because I've been teaching forever. The way you teach students for me is, you train them on the rules from September to October and you sit back and enjoy the observations after then, you know? And it was like a prison in those rooms.

And that day I learned that teaching isn't about kids, it's about adults. And so I changed not what I wanted to say, but how I was going to say it. And for those two, I met with them every week and called the union person myself. And after like the third meeting the person said to me, "Are you going to put them on a plan of improvement?" I said, "We're working on improving, every day." When they turned in their lesson plans I gave them feedback every time. So I'm not aware now that these folks are operating from a punitive framework, and I'm operating from a supportive one. *Do I not want you to have a job? I want you to pay your phone bill, light bill, house note.* Let's work together, and get this done! And no matter what they did, I stayed the course because it wasn't about them, it was about those kids.

So around changing my actions, I think I'm really a situational person. I really believe that no one wakes up in the morning saying, "I think I'll go today and not educate

a group of kids. I think today I'm going to go and be the rudest person I can be.” At that school, I had the biggest job I ever had, and that was to demonstrate to a group of adults that I would not take, or have an attitude of *take no prisoners*, in working with these kids. You will either do the right thing or make the choice, and I'll help you make the choice. And then it wasn't just the *Regular Ed* kids that were being mistreated; it was the kids in the *Gifted* program as well. It was such a state of sadness. And so I was fighting a battle upstream like salmon, trying to go up against the fast current.

### **I Had to Get Mean**

And then when I was at another school, I discovered I had to go back into a shell because those people were darn mean! They're mean to themselves and are mean to kids and are mean to each other, so I had to be mean. I mean, I could hardly stand myself I was so mean. Because *A* they were 100 percent union people, and *B* the district had adopted this site-based decision-making model. But *C*, no one really explained to these people what that meant when you worked in a schoolhouse. Okay? No one defined for them what decisions they could make. And certainly hadn't asked me my permission. So, that was pretty brutal, but it was worth my time.

But I had these folks, the librarian, first of all there were books from 1976. You know when you open a brand-new book it goes *creek* a little bit? Growing up, I never had it *creek* for me. These kids couldn't touch the books. And this is a school with majority children of color. Not Black, but fifty or how many ever different languages were in that school. And kids were not afforded the capacity to use a building that was theirs. *They will touch and make dirty every book in the library*. The library office was stacked floor to ceiling with brand new books that had been purchased over the last five years!

Now you're talking to somebody who is committed to books, right. So I go in there and I say, "I need these books out in the public." She put like five or six books on the table out on Monday and had kids come and explore them. So I went in one weekend and I pulled every box out, opened them up, spread all the books on the tables, the whole works. *I don't blame her for calling the union.*

And there were not books purchased over the last six months, they were books purchased over the last six years! When the Feds give you money for a school year, or the district, it is not for two years down the line, it is for that year. Use that money for those babies that year! It's *their* books! They're going to use them! She took offense and I wonder why! Every class was scheduled to come into the library to review books, and I closed the library down the following two days and told her I needed all those books catalogued. And she took sick leave and I got two parents in to do it. *You can't stop me when I'm on a roll!*

### **Students First**

I don't think in the big picture, there was anything wrong with that private and public school partnership. What I think was wrong was a lack of clarity regarding what the desired outcomes should be. And so as a newcomer the project was already underway when I walked in, and to tell people what you've been doing for the last three years is crazy, nobody wants to hear that. But it had the potential for being a really worthwhile project. The school had a habit and permission as kids moved from grade to grade to release teachers at the grade and then hired other folks. And so when I went to the school, they had preschool, which is not funded by the state or the Feds. That kindergarten and first grade and second were a part of *The New School* program. And the third, fourth, fifth

grade, they were getting moved to third grade and isolate the fifth grade kids but used funding for just those grades.

This was just like my first year teaching! The haves and the have-nots! The *old* books that were stamped as *new* books. I can't be a part of that! Somebody should have told them I wasn't going to be a party to that before they asked me to come over there. Because you won't engage me in questionable and immoral acts, *number one*. Harmful behaviors and isolating kids, *number two*, and systematic, painful experiences for adults, *number three*. And as usual, when I went there people left. I don't know why folks think I'm so mean. I'm really sweet.

And so before I started, I made a tour of the school with one of the district officials. When you walked in the building, stuff *oozed* from between the boards. All this crazy stuff pops out. I don't know where it came from but we took a walk of that school and they're planning to have summer school. Now these people have been in the school for a while already. Kids were wearing uniforms, they're giving little kids snacks and breakfast and all of this. You walk in the classroom and they had desks that must have been from the 1940s, with the side arm thing. The paper on the counter was what I call *cornbread paper*, that old paper with the blue and red lines and stuff. It smelled old, like wet newspaper. That's what was in there.

I said, "You expect me to come in here in June, and work in this environment? And hold summer school for little kids? You're dreaming. I'm not doing this, I have lupus. I have a disease, and if I walked in this place for six months I would be dead. I'm not living here, and I'm not bringing kids in here."

He thought I was accustomed to new buildings because I came from across town. Then I had to do a run down for him and said, “Let me tell you about where I’ve been.” I talked about Miami and I talked about Detroit and I talked about Virginia, and told him, “I’m not accustomed to new, I am accustomed to safe. And this place is unsafe. And you need to figure out with the Superintendent how you’re all going to get this building suitable for kids because I’m not coming in here.” And so they did. That building was closed in June and a tent put over it. When you walked in there, people had masks and suits! Hazmat suits! *Is that what you call them?* And they wanted kids to come in that place and they’re all dressed up like that? Give me a break!

So that’s how we ended up with new tiles and paint in the building. And before school was out, I had a dumpster put along at every upstairs window where people could just throw everything out the window: chairs, tables, papers, and books. Everything. The newest book in that building was like 1956. It was gross. It was gross! And then I ordered new desks and new chairs, paper, everything. It’s like, *I don’t care what you people say.*

### **Can’t Learn in Ugly**

An article was written about this particular episode. The author was highlighting different schools and institutions that promoted sustainable designs for better learning environments. It printed:

New principal Gloria Mitchell, on her first site visit after being hired to help turn around a very low-performing elementary school in inner-city Seattle, took one look at the hallway floors—a sorry patchwork of peeling linoleum tiles—and decided they had to go. “They were ugly,” she said. “I don’t think you can learn in ugly.” Students who had not yet learned to read were nonetheless able to read the messages even those modest

renovations communicated to them every day they came to school: Someone values me and values the work we do in this building. Someone wants me to succeed. The buildings in which we ask our children to learn are themselves teachers. Without question, our design and construction decisions speak volumes to students about what adults believe and honor. (Reeder, 2009, p. 79)

### **Being Human**

One of Gloria's greatest attributes as a leader is her connection to humanity. She takes the time to acknowledge that people are what make an organization viable, especially when it comes to running a school. Countless times she has stood for the rights of students, staff, and families that extended beyond her job description. She understands people and knows what it takes to make a stand on behalf of the powerless and limited, and empowers others at the same time.

\* \* \*

I've been around educators who were not chosen for the profession, who had gone to school and gotten a degree but forgot to bring their human nature with them, to discern whether or not that is what they should do. I've had to have really hard conversations with many, many people. And I've never put myself in situations maybe purposely, or just strategically, where I for an extended period of time have allowed folks to pigeonhole me. Because one thing I am 100 percent is I'm 100 percent honest and caring for human beings. My point is that we have a responsibility, again to teach what it is to live in today's society, and how it is we can contribute as human beings to support our fellow man.

It's like the *Blackest* I've ever felt as a person, as a leader, was in Seattle as an Educational Director with a Black superintendent. I observed actions, attitudes and

behaviors that I could only define as *inhumane*. That's the best way I can put it. I don't want to use any educational word or any word to soften it. It was *inhumane* the way many leaders were defined and treated and responded to, as they worked to do the hard work.

When new leaders come into a district, everybody wants to *topsy-turvy* the whole organization and do their own thing when they read the book, "When I become superintendent I will..." Only they forgot to continue reading where it says, "It takes time, and overtime, and in time." They forgot to read that part.

And as a leader, in that situation, I had to *get Black*. But more than *getting Black*, I had to dig down and use all of me. The *religious* me. The *Black, nappy-headed, bow-headed kid from Plant City, Florida* me. The *ghetto* me that worked in Detroit, Michigan. The *heartfelt* me that worked with physically and sexually abused kids in Alaska. All of that stuff flooded down on me.

It's a moral imperative. I don't agree with much of what John Goodlad says except that one phrase, *moral imperative*, and that we do the right and just thing. You know me well enough to know that I was sitting up there with green eyes with my mouth open, drooling. And one day I remember saying, "What the hell!?!?" *I thought it was a thought bubble*, but it came out of my mouth. "Are you people serious in here?" As a leader in the district, if I'm sitting there, I'm a participant if I choose not to remove my body. And as a participant in those conversations I felt I was betraying folks behind those closed-door meetings. And I want you to know nine times out of nine and a half it was only my voice that was speaking a *different* voice, and fighting the fight for those *outside* that door.



I spoke up for the truth. And other folks would find simple sentences or try to restate what I said, and that's when I became very bold. Because it struck me as strange that you would fear someone. Yeah, they may have the superintendent title, but that means they have the ultimate responsibility for the outcomes. But it doesn't mean you can bully a conversation. No one would disagree with the superintendent until I started it. "No, what you're saying doesn't make sense! That's wrong!" So when folks were being caught for stealing monies and all that foolishness, I wasn't surprised because she was focused on the wrong thing.

### **The Consequences of Conviction**

A consequence? I'm going to tell you. The consequence was me retiring before I really wanted to retire. Because I refused to have my name as part of something that I didn't believe in nor did I participate in. And I made a decision that I can't do this. I guess I could have taken leave and gone to another district. But my heart was wounded. It was unbelievable. And the folks who have lived that way continued to work and function in that way. I'm a lot of things, I'm wild, I'm loud, I'm energetic and I'm a lot of things. But I am never ever dishonest or intentionally hurtful. And I won't allow someone else to force me into that position.

### **Put Yourself in the Picture**

Working tirelessly for others is the hallmark of Dr. Mitchell. When I asked focus group participants about her limitations, many spoke of her selfless acts or sacrificial attitude when it came to her family. Ironically, her *limitations* were really seen as *strengths* because it was all about what she was willing to do for others. The limiting factor, however, was that there was often times great sacrifice or loss because of her ardent belief in people.

\* \* \*

I think one of the major life lessons I learned might have been to always remember to put you somewhere in that picture that you build for others. For so, so many years I forgot that. I learned that you don't have to give everything to give to someone. That I don't have to feel guilty, nor should one feel guilty because they chose to step up or to step out and as others might describe, *step over*.

Take my first year teaching for example. At the end of each month, I must have had \$36 left because we got paid nothing. But my mom wanted an addition put on her house and she said, she didn't ask, she just said, "You will pay for it." And it was another one of those things. And a loan paper came and I signed it. Even though to go to college, I had scrubbed bathroom floors at 5 o'clock in the mornings.

My second year I started teaching Methods and Materials for teaching Reading. I became the Audio Visual Specialist. And all of those things nobody gave me anything. I worked for everything I got. I cleaned toilets and I cleaned them well. *That's why I'm still a toilet freak. I love cleaning bathrooms.* But when your mama said to do that, I did it without question. Yet I had three brothers and five other siblings older than me that she never put any demands on.

But because I had this teaching job, there was this assumption that I also would be having money. And so this loan was like \$200 a month. My rent was \$100 a month. I had to buy a car and that was \$79 a month. Really, I had like \$36 left. But I did that because she said I had to do it. And I never got a thank you for that. There was never an understanding that I gave to others before I gave to myself. And so even now I find ways to not have money, so that I don't have to give it to somebody, like a family member.

Where does it say in the Bible or somewhere that the sixth child must work, earn dollars, give it away and be happy about it? Be forever empty and not receive any blessings every time? Where does it say that? I don't get it. People always try to tell me to stop giving these people my money because they will keep asking as long as you're giving. I don't know, it is just what it is.

### **Doing the Right Thing by Giving to Others**

I do the right thing because I know better. I don't have a lot of money in my retirement system and I've given a lot of it away. And I don't have a lot of stuff because I never had it to begin with. And if somebody else needs it, it's my responsibility to give it up. I didn't see a need for money. I still have very poor money management skills. Like I told you, if I had it I would give it away. That's why I don't have any now.

When I think about it, I never did value money very much. I remember picking strawberries for the strawberry festival in 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. There was lot of farming during that time and that's how we as kids earned money. I would go pick strawberries and work very hard. Don't get me wrong; I worked very, very hard. And frequently I was the one who picked the most the whole time because I didn't talk to anybody. I just hummed to myself and thought of things and visualized whatever. And when I got paid I would take the change plus \$6 or \$5 whatever the two lowest denominations were, and gave my mama the envelope. None of my other siblings gave my mama a penny. I never quite got that because you know what, we never really had money. I was treated the poorest in my family, I believe. But I gave the most and I never regretted it. I never regretted it.

## **Leading From the Inside Out**

*The work really wasn't about me. It was about what was going on in the inside, that changed the outside.*

Whether she was in college learning how to become a teacher, in the classroom or leading a building and district, she was the same. Gloria is who she is. One participant said, “We all know how matter of fact that Gloria is. She is a straight shooter and that’s why everyone loves her.” You always knew what you were going to get, and there is contentment in knowing that. She might not tell you what you want to hear, but she will tell you what you need to hear. It is a leading that comes from a deep place, and as another participant so aptly said, “She was a rare breed.” The comment came in the context of school leadership and how people no longer speak their mind nor their conscience.

### **Inside Out**

As for me and my doctoral dissertation, I was going to write about how principals working at a school can empower other people to do the work. I was going to show how the work really wasn’t about me it was about what was going on in the inside, that changed the outside. That’s why when you said your dissertation title was going to be something about the *inside out*, I thought, “Uh oh, this is getting to be a little bit scary.”

### **Muddy Waters**

Gloria was just starting a new school and I had come on board as a new teacher. We had our first back-to-school staff meeting in the library and everyone was anxious to meet the new principal. I remember the meeting so vividly. Everyone was assembled and waiting, talking in hushed voices. And Gloria walked in put a large stack of papers down. Then she just started by saying, “I’m willing to walk through muddy waters for you. But you better be willing to walk

through clean water for me.” The stacks of paper were transfer papers ready for anyone who was not willing. And you could almost hear the silence that was hanging thick in the air.

\* \* \*

I remember that. Yes I did, always. And I had the union contract, with the pages marked. And I meant that then and I mean that now. I think that the phrase that’s frequently used by principals is, “I believe every kid can learn,” all of that is true. But that’s not where my work is. My work is with the adults. Mind you, I did lots of work with kids. That was my heart. When I wanted to have some realization of why I’m doing this work, I work with the kids. But what the real work is, it’s about the grownups.

### **Tell the Truth**

No matter what you do, tell the truth. It doesn’t have to always be politically correct, it doesn’t have to be flattering, but it does have to be truthful. And you know what, I’ve never been called to the carpet over something I have said because it was from the heart. Hey, I can manipulate a lot of things to get what I want, but it’s not like a secret. Everybody knows it.

### **Each One, Help One**

Where did I get that sense of *Each one, Help one*, from? I certainly didn’t grow up with it. But ever since I started teaching I’ve learned a lesson here and there. Certainly Fairparks Elementary taught me one. Opa Locka taught me a personal one. International Elementary taught me one when I was working with second language kids. Guam taught me a lesson about not letting kids be abused, and over use of drugs. And you do all that you can to support kids in their natural states. When I went to Detroit, I started with Head

Start again. That was with kindergarten age kids, and it was in the public school and I hired parents to work in the program. And that's when it started.

I removed myself from the learning piece and became the observer and allowed what the adults were doing with, and for kids, take a natural form. What ended up occurring is I watched grownups helping kids, as they helped each other. Now I didn't know this at the time, this was just framing in my head. I remember seeing Laureen at a table, and she couldn't work with her own kids but she could work with others' kids. They were making Easter baskets with balloons and they wrapped the balloons with some embroidery thread and then dipped it in this sugar mixture and then hung it up to dry. And I was watching them support these kids that were not their own. I think that was the beginning of my sense around this idea that teaching is more than about one *somebody*. This is about groups of *somebodies* taking on leadership roles and responsibilities.

And so I learned how to be truly open and collaborative; how to maneuver and work together, kind of like orchestrating. Now I've never been a good orchestrator leader, never ever. So that concept around *Each one, Help one* I think started first with the kids. And I've never been the same since. So, I was transforming as a leader, and as a person, and I was in turmoil about that. Nobody understood that crap.

When I'm home, I like to clean when I'm thinking and distressed, and all of that. And I was vacuuming one day and all of a sudden it just came to me, I'll have to write my dissertation about the use of Title I funds and how we did our kindergarten program and how fifth graders became mentors. All I had to do is write about the *seed* of the work and where it came from. And that's how I ended up writing about *Project Succeed* because within that project all of us had a role, and each one took a little piece and no one

owned all of everything. So if one piece was missing, someone else could fill it in. But they couldn't fill in *all* the pieces.

I don't think it's so much about *Each one, Help one*. I think it's more about each of us having a responsibility for supporting each other, if we care about each other. And that's what I did. If you do the right thing, people will come up for you.

### **An Obligation and Responsibility**

I don't see myself as an exceptional anything, I see myself as one of many who had a responsibility to do something with her life. And it was a choice I made that drove me to where I am. I hear this thing that we must *return* to our community to do well. Wherever we are, *that* is our community. That's my heart, I don't apologize. If I'm living in Bothell, Washington and I'm working in Bellevue or in Seattle, or wherever. I have an obligation as a human being to bring my experiences to make my home community better, fairer, more appropriate, cleaner, or whatever.

I have a responsibility to make my workplace the same thing. If Black babies are there I can't say, "Come here little Black kid, let me tell you how to make it in this world." Wrong! How many kids have you seen not like you but you have an obligation to all of them? That's our responsibility. That's the only time I get a little squeamish when I hear folks, like our president. Okay, President Obama, from what we read was born in Hawai'i. How many people expect him to go to Chicago and turn the world around. He can't stop all those folks from killing each other. What he can do is what he's been doing, trying to make the world's human conditions better for all people. That's his obligation as also it's yours and mine.

You know, I remember my son Thero when we first moved to Washington. There was a guy, who by the way was not homeless and nor was he shabby, but he would take money up on the corner. And then he would be up in a suit later in the day at Starbucks. But my son saw this and cried and said, “Mama, we’ve got to give him some money. Look where we live. And when you go and cook dinner he is not going to have any dinner, so we’ve got to give.” And the child wouldn’t stop, so we had to give him money for that. But that provoked a conversation around what’s his purpose, what’s that guy’s purpose, how do we delineate between helping and not helping? And that’s when my kids and I became intentional about what actions, attitudes and behaviors will we engage in to make a difference in our community.

So my kids saw me as the chairperson for the fundraising committee that built the YMCA building. They saw that I was on the board for the Museum of Flight, the Boys and Girls Club, and serving as a principal. My son and I worked at a day care for the YMCA. Thero connected with a boy who was autistic. Three years later we were at a parade in downtown Bothell and the mother stopped us. That little boy saw a bigger Thero and ran to him as if they’d been together yesterday. And he looked back at the kid, he called him by name, they embraced again, you know what I mean? The mom said, “My son always talks about him, always.” Interesting. So my point is that we have a responsibility. A responsibility to teach what it is to live in today’s society and how it is that we can contribute as human beings to support our fellow man.



## **Faith**

I think the entire operation called schooling is about faith. That takes faith. Not just on our part but on part of the kids. There is something in us that says we're going to trust them. That takes faith; you understand what I'm saying? And so I think our silent prayers, "God be with me today, allow me to be behind this wheel and remember where I'm going and why I'm going there." All of it is about faith and prayer. But truly, truly faith has to be deep when you're in these schools. I don't know how to do it except through faith and God's grace. You know, somebody's hand is over there saying, "Keep calm people. Calm down, it's going to be okay."

## **Servant Leadership**

As I was preparing for my research and my time to interview Gloria drew closer, we would speak on the phone from time to time. And like a good teacher, she even assigned me homework! Since she is forever my teacher and mentor, I was ready to listen. And am I glad that I did, because she said to me, "Ed, if you want to understand me, and understand who I am, you have to read Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*." The importance of this artifact was a true gift and gave wonderful insight into her leadership style. In my journal, I wrote on March 16, 2016:

*Greenleaf gives me a glimpse into Gloria, perhaps in a way that I never knew before. A rhyme to her reason, a method to her madness. Gloria is a strong leader and is very dominant. She doesn't tell you what you want to hear, rather, what you need to hear. The section on awareness is excellent. It makes me think back to all the times her wisdom and perception and discernment guided her in her decision-making. Awareness brings value building and value clarifying. It guides. (Noh, 2016)*

Servant leadership, according to Greenleaf, Spears, & Covey (2002), has many facets and the servant as leader is constantly balancing all of it at once. The journal entry above refers to a section called *Awareness and Perception* and states:

Framing all of this is awareness, opening wide the doors of perception so as to enable one to get more of what is available of sensory experience and other signals from the environment than people usually take in. Awareness has its risks, but it makes life more interesting; certainly it strengthens one's effectiveness as a leader. (Greenleaf, et al., 2002, pp. 40-41)

When I asked Gloria about Greenleaf's work and the impact it had on her as a leader she shared the genesis of its influence and how she applies it to her work as an educational leader. She understands that leadership is much more than just head knowledge, but something far deeper. It is being fully aware of your self in the context of your surroundings.

Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity. (Greenleaf et al., 2002, p. 41)

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I would read something at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and I will be sitting with that information. And frequently I read the Bible and other books just by opening it up and let my eyes and my heart guide it. That's when I fell in love with Greenleaf to be honest. When I opened that book up and I began to read it, in the middle of the pages, *I saw me*. I saw that it was okay to not use your head knowledge to guide the day-to-day work. It is really okay to use your heart as long as your heart didn't get in the way and damage others. And I'll be sitting with it and watching people interface with the words I

had read earlier that morning, that was written by someone I knew nothing about. You don't have to be a Christian to do this work, but you do have to have a giving heart. Does that make sense?

### **Reflective Leadership**

*I don't see myself as an exceptional anything, I see myself as one of many who had a responsibility to do something with her life.*

Good leadership is reflective in nature. It is the ability to assess where you are now and what you would change to move forward. In the following section, I asked Gloria to reflect on her role specifically as an educational leader. I not only probe her to reflect about her strengths, but also her limitations. You will see that her responses are consistently candid and colorful at times, and always honest. As she considers both strengths and limitations of her leadership, she reflects back as well as projects forward, as she ponders the future of education.

The exchanges between Gloria and myself spanned over the three interview sessions. However, it is noteworthy that most of her responses below are entirely in tact with very little editing. My questions are in ***bold italics***, followed by her direct responses. It is very clear to this researcher that Dr. Mitchell is highly reflective and one who understands the complexities of leadership. And of course, as I have always known, only Gloria can say the things that she says... and get away with it...

***What is your strength as an educational leader?***

I think, no, I know. I know I'm really good at looking at the big picture and breaking it down into components and going deeper into outlining what it takes to get

there. And then digging in the ditch and then finding books who can do each of those to make it real again. I'm really good at that, perceiving the depth and moving it forward.

***What are your limitations?***

Patience.

I think at the last school assignment, and maybe even my last job assignment. I saw I could easily outline where it was the district wanted to go, but I think their impatience caused a community uprising and pain, and then tolerance. But where I was in control of it was my last school assignment. As a leader we were able to, I was able to, facilitate folks seeing the big picture. We were able to clearly identify what we needed to do to make it work, and I wanted to move faster. But because folks have limits, it's *your* idea when *your* big picture is *yours*. *Yours* means alone, *without* others. You have a responsibility to take it from taking it from *yours*, to *ours*. And I had to develop patience and listen when others are saying, *What you're thinking is only in your head. Can you give it to us please?*

But I also had people in that setting who could say, *Uh, huh, I heard that*. There were a lot of folks who took on my personality and put in words what I was saying. Then they would give it back to me so then I could see it and go, *Yeah, that's what I meant. But that's not what you said*. And then we started building pictures from that. So many of the pictures that were built, academic pictures that were built, had many handwritings on it because it wasn't necessarily my writing alone. It might have been some of my thinking, but it was somebody else's thinking too, so that *yours* will mix with *ours*. And then *ours* become this massive thing, and they go, *A-ha, yeah!* Then pieces you thought were important, you draw a line through it because there's a better idea and we plan those

together. And I think as a result of that we were able to do far more. In the end, that patience paid off.

With regards to the teacher observational strategy we developed, we presented it to the State. I think it paid off big time because it's about you being brave to make *yours*, *ours* in a timely fashion with mutual respect, group ownership, and patience.

***How would you describe yourself with one word?***

A lot of people call me *Bitch*. Oh I'm tapping, I forgot. One word I think... [pause] that's a tough one, but not really. I would describe me as *resilient*, that's an action word. A word around regarding leadership word would be... What leadership word would describe me? I'm still around that word *hopeful*. No matter what happened from way back when to even now that word is *hopeful*. You know, if we did that Venn diagram, that word *hopeful* would be right in the middle of everything. Now I know it's not a strategy for getting anything done, but it sure is something that can keep it all together. That's what I think.

***What metaphor best describes you?***

Somebody else should be finding a metaphor for me. Takes me back to the *Bitch* word. *That Bitch will do anything to get her teachers what they need so that they can educate our kids*. Well, I've been told that too, and it works for me. Whoever and whatever you want to call me. But seriously, I'd do anything for the kiddos.

I want you to hear me. I think it is my responsibility that ultimately I ensure every kid learns. But ultimately, ultimately, my job is to make sure teachers have what they need. The environment needs to be safe, that they have the professional development they

need, and the materials so that the teachers have everything they need so that they can do the job that they're assigned to do. And I'll do anything to make that happen.

I would go and listen to Boards, Superintendents, I will sit with the Governor, I'll join boards, I'll fight a mama, I'll do anything. And it's really not only for the kids, but I'd do it so that the adults who are assigned to do the work can do that work well. You do anything that it takes to give teachers what they need to do the job.

Because really my heart touches the kids, not my hands. My hands touch the teachers. If I don't have the best in you to be in front of those kids, then I'm not doing the job. I said I will do whatever it takes to get the teachers what they need to get the job done. Then they need to do it. I'm just saying.

***Has your leadership style changed over the years?***

Absolutely. You know that I'm different now than I was then. There were times when I didn't care who I said it to and how I said it. But I had to learn quickly to frame my thoughts in a manner that they could be heard. Because no one wants to hear *bully* and sometimes I *do* come off as a bully, or sometimes I *did* come off as a bully. Sometimes I came off as a *know-it-all* even though I knew what I was talking about. And sometimes I came off, and sometimes I choose to continue coming off, as someone who's lived that. And I'm an expert at it, and I know what I'm talking about. Not only can I quote you the resources, I could tell you where to go to find it and to live in it and breathe it today. And I don't deny that I know that. Does that make sense?

But if I behave in a manner that's too strong then folks can't hear it, they get defensive. But if I behave and deliver the message in a tone of collaboration and kindness, and at the same time I could say in my head, *I don't need these dumbshits*.

Then I can get through and people can learn. So I can't teach if I'm using body, words and actions that are isolating the group that I'm trying to reach. That's why it's important that I'm constantly modifying the language and behavior through the years.

I want you to notice that even in these interviews, I intentionally used single, two and no more than three syllable words in our conversations. I purposely focus on *life language* within academia because that's ultimately who I am. You might see me as Dr. Gloria. Other folks do when I need to use that kind of crap of language I do. Ultimately *I'm just Gloria, I'm just Punkin*.

And so yes, I modified every time I did something. I modified it to meet the folks I was with. And the other thing is I didn't *preplan*, but I *planned with*. What I did at one school I didn't take it over and say, *Oh, we're going to duplicate this at the other school*. When I went to the next school, there was a bottom line of, *Here's who I am. Here's how I work. Here's what we need to get done*. But really, whatever needs to happen, happens.

That's always been my role and it's easy to think that if we do A, B, and C in one school, then we can just modify it and take it over to another school. But unless you take the same kids, the same adults, the same parents, and the same staff, you can't duplicate it. But what if parts of the structure around safety, around required mandates, and all of that were put in place? Then, how can we as a family now *minutia* the inside so that it makes sense for us.

I've also learned that, you know, life is pretty painful but you don't have to fight every fight, every battle. Which one thing will make the biggest impact the quickest? That's what I do subconsciously. I don't like sticking with things too long. I want it done,

I want it done effectively, and I want to leave it alone. I don't want to come back and say I meant to say...

Whatever I say, I mean. Whenever I do something, I meant to do it. I wasn't haphazard about it. I was very thoughtful about it. There are going to be losses in the process but in the end you're going to feel good about being run over because I thought it through.

***What advice do you have for the next generation of educational leaders?***

My real hope is that those of us in my group, I hate to say *older group*, who've walked through those hard valleys can stay in the system long enough to help these young folks who don't have a clue how to navigate *through* the words. It's like being in a swimming pool and someone just dumps all the words, dumps all the strategies, dumps all the evaluation systems in the pool and watch them flounder.

But those of us who have been in it can support our young folks that are doing it. Get their *a-ha*, as we've gotten our *a-ha* moments to get the job done. When I go in schools now I'm so disheartened by the number of *must-dos* people have been given, and how restricted our little ones are. And the older kids! I support middle schools and high schools now. They're all restricted. It's like everybody must listen to somebody else. Kids don't have an opportunity to listen to their own drummers.

I don't think it's true that we already know what we need to know to fix education. I think the need for educating kids today is so different. Teachers need to be engaged on a daily basis and the questions regarding how to best connect our kids to the resources. We need to redefine teaching so that it doesn't look like one person in front of the class orchestrating 30 little machines.



We have PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), and should require PLCs in some contracts. And when the people come together, they're looking at data from an assessment from the end of the unit! No one is going back to reteach it. So why are we looking at it? Why are we talking about it? How fun and how informing it would be if we required each day to come together with the question that we had to respond to the next day in our classrooms. For example, what if there was a question that was in your six classes today and there were 45 kids that turned in the paper that had the wrong answer to question number six. What can you do tomorrow to address the needs of those 45 kids and at the same time allow the other 110 kids to move forward?

And why are we even talking 90 percent of the time? But there is this sense that teaching is about an adult talking at kids, and it's not! You know, why can't we use multiple resources to access information? Why is it we took the encyclopedias out of the library? *Nothing like a smelly, old book to turn you on.* So when you send kids and you say go to this section of the library and look up something, folks want to immediately go to the computer. There are other sources. How about going down to the PE room and looking at the catalogues up on the shop to compare fractional numbers and costs? This is what I'm saying, we are allowing ourselves to be pigeonholed into one resource, which is a computer, even though it has multiple resources within it. By the time we teach kids to navigate their resources, times up. We're still under that time bound schedule.

My hope is that we learn to use technology in a way that's supportive of deepening learners' knowledge instead of stifling it. We give them a computer and then we tell them where to go. We want to limit how deep they can go into it and we want to put a time span on when, how and where they can do it. It's crazy. My hope is that we

educate our kids enough so that in the next ten years, should I end up in that senior center, that I have a scanner that can read my prescription that says, “Give Gloria one pill four times a day, not four pills one time a day!” That’s what I said way back when, that’s what I say now. I want me a reader!

And the environmental factors too, are so impacting our kiddos. I have always been a news freak, so when 9/11 happened I was already up and looking and was shocked. Or when Christie McCullough’s space shuttle came down. So all of the trauma of our world coming through a 67 year old brain is very different than being filtered through a five, ten, or fifteen year old brain. And so it’s a matter of how do we help our babies navigate through their real world, which is very different than my world, and yours. And we’ve got to do a better job of helping our babies learn how to filter that.

So my hope is that more of our babies survive, than not. And it’s a cruel world that parents have to deal with. I used to say that I have total control over my kids, but not anymore. Our kids are more impacted by life circumstances than they are by us. When our babies walk out of our houses now they see things that are just *off the hook*. I never ever lived in a neighborhood where my kids would walk out of the house and see a homeless person not bathed, unshaven, dirty and with raggedy clothes. Okay, where can you move and our kids not see that? No place. We’re not doing a great job at that right now.

***What would you tell a younger Gloria? What advice would you give?***

Oh, that’s a big one, Ed.

I would really tell her... [long pause]. I’d speak quickly from that. That’s interesting. I’d say it’s going to be okay. Trust yourself. Leaving does not make you a

bad person. Leaving affords you an opportunity to lead and to grow and to impact change so that the next Gloria or *Glorias* experiences won't have to be as hard as yours. That's what I would say to her.

And I hope I have, at some point, included in our conversation that in many ways the love of the work, and a desire to do the work well, and to guide the work in some ways caused me to be unhealthy. Because I loved others and I loved things. Things meaning calm, things meaning [sigh] the lack of trust, things meaning folks staying off a staff person's back, that kind of things. I jeopardized my own health to protect others when really I should have simply just allowed people to back off, and back them off in a more stern way. It was later in life when I discovered that. It is not always possible to negotiate. Sometimes it's necessary to withdraw. You don't have to fight every battle.

***How do you want Dr. Gloria Mitchell to be remembered?***

There were choices I made that drove me to where I am today. I want someone who says, *I remember Dr. Mitchell, I remember she went on that playground and played four square with us. Yeah, I also remember the day she called my mama, had my mama pick me up. I also remember the day she made me come to school at 3 o'clock instead of 8.* They're all memories into their adulthood that's made the difference in who they are as human beings.

I wished we had had the opportunity to sit as a group, a family group. All of us, to say a prayer together, where we could have said, *God, thank you for affording us at different times in our lives an opportunity to love a stranger, to care for souls and spirits that were just given to us, to allow us to be me, or to be ourselves in a most profound way.* That's what I wish. Now I'm getting too serious, and now I'm done.

## CHAPTER 4

### LEADERSHIP IMPACT: FOCUS GROUP PERSPECTIVES

*Inspiring was my first biggest thought about her. I think she is a true leader. She's completely committed to children's learning. She's generous, she's skilled, she's so competent. She's compassionate and passionate (Participant).*

#### Introduction

When conducting my research, I was solely focused on Dr. Mitchell and her unique skill set as an educational leader. She embodies so much of what I have always believed in school leadership from my time in the classroom. In my study, I had both an insider/outsider perspective since I taught under Dr. Mitchell as a classroom teacher. Even after becoming a fellow principal in the same District, she continued to be my mentor. She continued to teach me, guide me and propel me forward in my career. In many cases, she did this unknowingly. But every time she spoke or acted, I was listening and observing.



There were times when we attended district-wide leader meetings and she would boldly stand against the superintendent or say something that we were all thinking, but did not have the courage to say. Or when she would be highlighted in the local news for innovative leadership practices in her school. Even when she went on to district leadership, she may not have been my direct supervisor, but she always had time to teach

me. Even since moving from Washington State, Gloria continues to be my soundboard and my conscience. Even my wife will rhetorically quip, *What would Gloria say to you right now?* This was especially true when I am struggling with a difficult leadership decision, or any life decision to be honest. Her impact on me is profound.

From the onset of this research project, I knew by my own account, the magnitude and impact of Dr. Mitchell as an effective and transformational leader. I also had the privilege of working in two completely different school settings with Dr. Mitchell as a classroom teacher. I knew the values and strengths that she gave to me as a developing administrator. I also knew I was not the only one. Over the years, Dr. Mitchell has mentored many individuals and it was important for this study to also capture their stories, thoughts, memoirs, and reflections regarding her leadership impact in their lives.

### **Focus Groups**

There were a total of fourteen people who participated in the focus groups. Seven were classroom teachers, four were support positions, and three, including myself, were building administrators. Two worked together with Dr. Mitchell in both school settings. Three participants could not attend the focus group interviews, but did send in written responses to add to the body of research.

As I conducted the two focus groups, I was amazed that though the two different staff members were of different schools and districts, and most have never met one another, there was a common theme that was shared and expressed through the interviews, even up to 20 years later. And whether it was about Dr. Mitchell's leadership qualities, her strengths and challenges, first impressions, and even metaphors, the similarities were uncanny. Of course, the subject of the study is the constant. But more than that, I believe it speaks to the enduring quality that defines

Gloria. You know exactly who she is and she is consistent because of her values and belief systems. One participant captured it best when describing Dr. Mitchell:

We're all different. Of all of our differences, we've had very similar experiences of this person, which speaks to the integrity of that person. She didn't present a different face or a different style to any of us. And she's tenacious. And once she gets hold of you, she won't let go. (Participant)

The two school settings were very different as they were in two different districts within the Puget Sound area in the State of Washington. One school was located in an affluent suburban area with many high performing schools. The elementary school that Gloria led and I taught in was unique in the district with a very diverse student population, representing roughly 27 different language groups.

The other school was located in the downtown central area of Seattle and had a student population that was nearly 90% Black. As an inner-city school, it had its own challenges, especially with academic performance issues. Distinctive to this school was a private and public partnership with the school. Dr. Mitchell would be the third principal in as many years to take the helm. She was highly recruited for the position and she was definitely the right person, at the right time for that community.

In this chapter, I give voice to other *co-researchers* who worked with Dr. Mitchell. I begin each section with a prompt and then allow the different perspectives to add to the design, and the details. Participant names and even their schools are left anonymous so that the focus will be on the words of the message. If background information is required, I will add details for context. Direct quotes are indented after a title or set apart by three asterisks (\* \* \*) indicating multiple voices and perspectives.

## One Word Descriptions

At the beginning of both focus group interviews, all the participants were asked to share one word to describe Dr. Mitchell. Several respondents could not settle on only one word and the most repeated word used to describe Dr. Mitchell was, *inspirational* and *visionary*, depicted below in a *Word Cloud* that graphically displays the frequency of words.

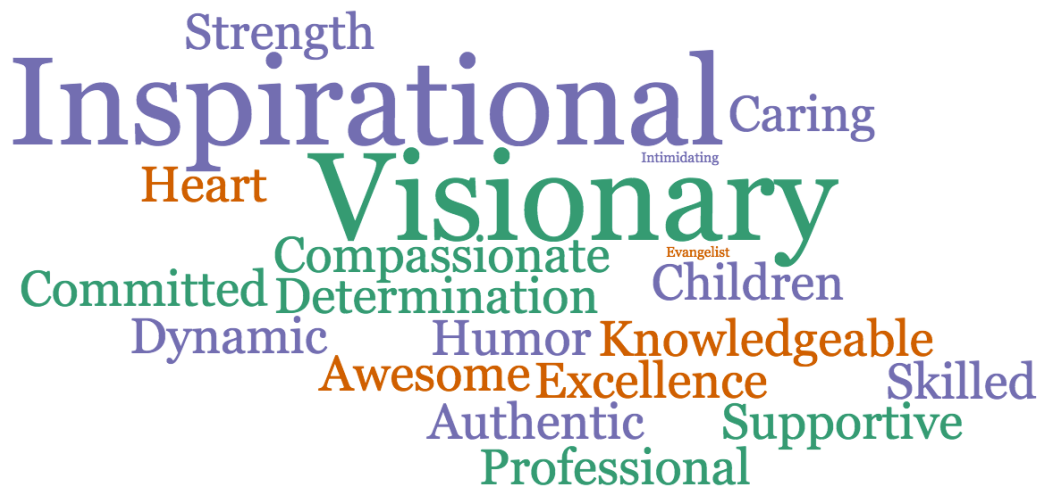


Figure 4.2. Frequency of *One Word* descriptions to describe Dr. Mitchell. (www.wordsift.org)

Throughout the course of the interviews, it was evident that Dr. Mitchell’s leadership impact could not only be captured in one word, but the description and context behind the words. It is also noted that though different words are used to describe Gloria, they are all tied to her clear resolve as a champion for students.

**Visionary.** As a visionary, one participant said, “She knew the means to an end to make progress.” Another noted, “As an educational leader, she had a vision she was determined to meet for the school, by bringing all staff on board and her *children first* policy.” When it came to children, she is uncompromising and “she cared about each individual child.” Anyone who taught under Gloria knew that this was her vision about education for all children. There was no mistake about her motive or what she stood for.

\* \* \*

One of the things she did, she was very intentional about making the needs of the students the core of every single decision that was made about everything. Everything was about what the students need in order to be successful.

\* \* \*

She measured her success by how successful the kids were, how successful the families were, and how successful the teachers were. She didn't measure her success on how important she was or external praise she got. So her job as an administrator was not to be the most important person in the room. Her job as an administrator was to make sure that the room was all moving in the right direction.

And so in that sense she was a very unusual leader. Most leaders and bosses, they want it to be all about them and they're more interested in their own promotion, their own status, or their own safety. Their own agenda, their own agenda.

**Inspiration.** When it comes to inspiration, so many of the participants touched on this word and idea as Gloria's strength as a leader. They are inspired because of her ability to lead with compassion and inclusivity. "It's the *inspiration*. Let's forge ahead. And if you're with me, let's go!"

\* \* \*

She projected a kind of competence and kind of knowledge that required your participation. She expected you to respond and expected you to engage. And she wouldn't, she absolutely wouldn't take *no* for an answer. Her entire approach was, *I've got something to say, you've got something to contribute, let's get on with it*. She was



tremendously *inspiring* in that kind of approach, that kind of attitude, that kind of confidence, that kind of compassion, and that kind of message.

\* \* \*

*Inspiring* was my first biggest thought about her. I think she is a true leader. She's completely committed to children's learning. She's generous, she's skilled, she's so competent. She's compassionate and passionate. Those are my single word descriptions.

\* \* \*

She *inspired* me and helped set me on the path I'm on. Just like her work with us and other teachers, people she works with at the state level, and around the country, around the world, Gloria radiates the message that if we are all together, those components will lend themselves to make the world a better place.

And it starts with the adults, bringing those attributes out of the adults, that will touch kids in a way that will raise them up for future generations. So where folks have elements of self-doubt, question their own capacities for leadership, or whatever it is, she celebrates people in a way that really challenges them to reflect on who they are as a person, what roles they play in whatever organizations they are involved in. And then the connectedness of everybody so that we're all together on the same page, moving in the right direction for a certain purpose.

**Other Leadership Attributes.** Others describe her as *strong, determined, and excellent*, again in the context of working with students. For one, *compassion and sense of humor* came to the forefront. As a leader, one said that Gloria is, "*Awesome*, because she was in all places all the time willing to do anything... I mean I watched her change a baby's diapers on the floor of her office! She was in tune with everything going on around her." With such strong leadership traits,

such vision and drive and sense of purpose, one said that she can also be *intimidating*. She recalls when she first met Gloria. She thought to herself, “Boy, I surely don't want to screw up with this woman.” Another remarked, “Once one gets through the first *layer* of Dr. Mitchell’s persona, you discover the softer side, which cares deeply for children, families, and staff.”

**Unconventional.** The word that I personally associate with Gloria is *unconventional*. She set a special culture in her schools and it was anything *but* conventional. She asks us to trust her, but she also models the same trust in return. Meier (2003) writes about trust in the schools as a model for change. She says:

The trust I have in mind is not based on blind faith. It is a hard-won, democratic trust in each other, tempered by healthy, active skepticism and a demand that trust be continually earned—what school people these days call the demand for accountability. (p. 3)

I had the honor of meeting Dr. Deborah Meier at a lecture during my principal program at the University of Washington, and I commented that her leadership style is *very* unconventional. To which she quickly replied with a smile, “Are you?” She then signed my book, *To being unconventional*. At the time, I was not sure what I was, but Gloria’s name went to the top of my short list! A fellow teacher also recognized her unconventional style:

\* \* \*

She is a *rare breed*. In some ways it also seems like she was the last of an era of people who thought for themselves and were willing to disagree if they had a conviction that was otherwise from what the superintendent said. She used to say, “You don’t know how much crap I save you from downtown.” *What do you mean?* She would say, “I get on my computer and I highlight the whole list, and all of this stuff I’m supposed to share with you. I highlight it and I hit delete.”

She was so refreshing, because she was so real with us. Even if we had a dissenting opinion, she would hear us out and if there was a good rationale for why we disagreed with something, she would factor in what we were saying. But she also knew how to speak up and speak her own mind.

### **Transformational Leadership**

In grounded theory fashion, this chapter was developed through the data analysis process, which was born out of the focus group interviews. Merriam (2009) writes that grounded theory “begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in another set” (pp. 199-200). Along with the *One Word* responses to describe Dr. Mitchell’s leadership style, as well as their answers to other questions about leadership, a theme began to emerge. The words, ideas and stories to describe Dr. Mitchell were in essence the very definition of what it means to be a transformational leader. And while the participants may not have used the exact words or phrases that defined transformational leadership in Chapter 1, it is evident through the data that Gloria is the epitome of transformational leadership. According to Seltzer and Bass (1990), “Transformational leaders inspire their followers, deal individually with subordinates to meet their developmental needs and encourage new approaches and more effort toward problem solving” (Seltzer & Bass, 1990, p. 694).

For the purpose of the study, I borrow from the work of Burns (1978), Bass (1985), and Sosik and Dionne (1997) in their research of transformational leadership. Sosik and Dionne (1997) referred to the four factors that characterized transformational leaders, and identified them as the “Four I’s”: *Inspirational, Individual Concern, Intellectual Stimulation, and Idealized Influence* (p. 455). I will introduce each of the four transformational leadership attributes and

then provide voices from the focus group interviews to highlight Dr. Mitchell's leadership impact and implications for further discussion.

### **Inspirational**

If one has ever been part of an organization in any capacity, one understands the need for inspiration. Usually it is someone who is the *keeper of the vision*. Bass (1990) uses the term *charisma* to describe transformational leaders who “have great power and influence [and] inspire and excite their employees with the idea that they may be able to accomplish great things with extra effort” (p. 21). It is no surprise that one participant described Dr. Mitchell's leadership style by saying, “She's almost like an evangelist.”

To best understand leadership, “one must also understand the actions that individuals take to move individuals, groups, and/or organizations towards their goals” (Witherspoon, 1996, p. 9). Because ultimately, “leaders act as catalysts” (Murphy, 1968, p. 28). And they also use “language powerfully to gain support for their projects” including “slogans, acronyms, and symbols” to build common understanding and identity (Kirby et al., 1992, p. 308).

One such slogan that Dr. Mitchell often used was *Modeling Excellence*, which is aptly included in the title of this study. When Dr. Mitchell led school-wide assemblies, or was on the playground, or visiting classrooms, she would always take the opportunity to *catch* a student *modeling excellence*. And when she did notice, she would make sure everyone knew it. She would say, “I like how So-and-So is *modeling excellence* by walking in the hall.” And you can bet that every other student started to walk because they wanted Dr. Mitchell to notice them too! She would even say the same phrase in staff meetings and get the same results from the grown-ups! She sets a tone and a culture of excellence wherever she goes and you find yourself wanting to reciprocate and do better, and be better. John Morefield (retired administrator and mentor to

Dr. Mitchell) was quoted in a newspaper article featuring Dr. Mitchell. He said, “[Gloria] has this wonderful capacity to inspire people to be better than they’ve ever been, and as good as they can possibly be” (Shaw, 2002, para. 11).

When Dr. Mitchell moved to a new school within the same district. There was much anticipation of the *new boss* because her reputation definitely preceded her. A focus group participant shares the same memory I had about Gloria’s first staff meeting at a new school.

\* \* \*

I remember the first thing I ever heard her say in a staff meeting. Well, it’s the first thing I really remember. She said, “I want you to know I would be willing to walk through muddy water for you, but you better be willing to walk through clean water for me.” That always stayed with me because she did walk through a lot of muddy water for us. But she also had certain expectations of us.

She did not want us doing our jobs in a *half-assed* sort of way, or watching the clock, or wondering about whether or not this was in accordance with our contract. She had high expectations of us just like she was willing to go the extra mile for us.

And that is what people who know Gloria, I mean who really know and understand her heart, know that she is serious when it comes to leading her schools. And because she is consistent and her words align with her actions, people can respect that, or learn to respect it.

\* \* \*

The one significant thing I will never forget about Gloria is how she stood strong with staff members who did not see the importance of working towards our school’s vision. She would assure them she would be happy to find them another opportunity at a different school. And she meant it! Gloria didn’t accept the word *no* even from the

superintendent or the district. She was determined to stand strong and bring everyone on board in what she believed was best for the school.

\* \* \*

I remember her conversations with the teachers that she encouraged to leave because she had tried *XYZ*, this kind of professional development, this kind of evaluation, and this kind of support. And the conversation was, *This is not a classroom that brings out the best in you, that allows you to be successful. Let's find a classroom in another kind of school that will support you to do your best.* It was never, *You're not good enough, or you're disappointing me.* It's always, *Where can you be, and how can we work together towards your goals?* And that was quite remarkable, quite remarkable.

### **Individual Concern**

One of my first encounters with Dr. Mitchell came when I was a substitute teacher at her school. I had just moved to Washington State and was searching for a teaching position. I received a call from the office that she wanted to meet with me after school. I went into a sudden panic, *Did I do something wrong? Why does the principal want to see me?* I of course knew who Dr. Mitchell was, but I avoided her because frankly, she is such an intense person. But to my pleasant surprise, our meeting was nothing like I imagined. She did not critique my credentials or probe my pedagogy; she just genuinely wanted to get to know who I was as a person.

We talked about my family upbringing and why we moved to Washington, even about my faith. It was one of many personal, and real conversations that I had with Dr. Mitchell that left such an indelible mark, and one that I will never forget. I have shared this before, but it was *love at first sight* for me. The remarkable thing about it is that I am not the only one that shares a story of how Gloria makes a personal connection with people. And when she does make those

inroads, it was not “through games at staff meetings and filling out surveys or things like that which seems to be popular nowadays,” one recalls. “I’ve had a couple of good principals after her, but nobody with the personality she has. Nobody where I felt quite so loved and supported.”

It is no wonder that individual consideration and that *sense of care* is vital as “transformational leaders show concern for followers’ needs” (Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007, p. 1021). In fact, the personal attention that Dr. Mitchell gives to individuals, staff members all the way to the students, is really a testament of her love and care. This is supported by the fact that the theme of *family* or *community* was consistent in both school sites.

\* \* \*

I remembered she used to come around and say things like, *I haven’t seen so and so in the staff room eating lunch lately, I want you to go and invite them*. She was worried about all of us. She didn’t want you to just be in your room. She wanted you out of your room and she wanted the staff together. I mean I remember there being a food fight in that staff room a couple of times!

\* \* \*

That was the whole part of that *family* thing. I’ve never been in a school where we all joined together to eat a meal and didn’t feel particularly hurried. Every school I’ve been at since then, I eat at my desk, and I don’t connect as much with other people. She made sure that no one felt isolated.

\* \* \*

I first met Dr. Mitchell when I was a student at Antioch University and she was a professor in one of my classes. And our first interaction is when I came into one of her classes a couple of minutes late, after the session begun. I was wearing a baseball cap and

she asked me to remove my hat. I felt that I didn't really need to, and she just made it really matter of fact that I needed to remove my hat. And I felt like I was talking to my mother, my grandmother, my aunt, all *rolled up into one*.

And then I taught 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Grade at her school before she provided the opportunity for me to work as the house administrator as I worked on my master's degree and administrator's license. And so from that time on, Gloria has been a personal friend, a mentor in the work, a *second mother*.

Gloria, like Starratt (2004), knew that "we do not exist in a void, without people and Society. We cannot define or express ourselves unless it is in relationship with others" (p. 55). The idea of having *presence* with others, to be present in the moment, is a key leadership trait and means:

Taking the other inside of yourself, looking at the other really closely, listening to the tone of the other, the body language of the other. This being present is also an unspoken message to the other that you are there, attending to the other's message, responding to the other from your own spontaneous authenticity. (Starratt, 2004, p. 56)

\* \* \*

The agenda was not about Gloria; that was the difference. The agenda was about the work we are going to do and the focus was always on the work and the people doing the work, our emotional health, our sense of safety, our sense of challenge and our sense of compassion. She was demanding of that, for us to step up to it and to be part of a team, so it wasn't about Gloria being successful as much as it was about the school being successful. And that is a gift. That is a real gift to work with somebody who says you



matter, no matter how you come, you matter. And you'll get better and I'm going to be there with you.

\* \* \*

When I had cancer, she called me and said, "Anything you need, you just let me know and your school family will take care of you." I had to laugh at that because my own family was cast all over the country at that point. She said, "I'm serious now. So get serious." I respected her for that.

Dr. Mitchell's ability to be present in all situations is what makes her such an exceptional human being, and it is not reactive to situations, but proactive. She is actively engaging in authentic conversations and inserting her care and compassion into others (Starratt, 2013). One participant described it as "investing in every single person to stretch them professionally beyond where they were." Another said, "She targeted your strengths and helped you figure it out." All that takes genuine interest and genuine care. Gloria herself said that she has *an obligation* to help others and *that's a human issue and will always be a human issue*. Many, including myself, will agree that it is precisely her humanity, and her authentic interest in others that sets her apart from other leaders.

\* \* \*

I was a generalist in the classroom and I wanted to be an art specialist. She made that happen and that validated my vision of what I wanted to do with my life. Because it came down to what should I do, and she made me make that decision by myself. I did well and I did the National Board Certification. I did leadership in the State Art Association, the local, state and national levels. Just a lot of professional organizations,

leadership things that she kind of opened those doors for me to allow me to do those things. Validation things.

That changed my whole outlook on my career and my love for education. So, she helped steer me in that direction. She's so perceptive. It's like she knew that I wanted to do this. Take it and fly. And I did.

In the same way that Gloria is committed to the importance of the individual, she is even more committed, concerned, and caring when she focuses on what is best for the students.

\* \* \*

She made all the kids feel safe the same way. Especially kids who had behavior issues or other things going on. She would get them in her office and she would just let them know it's okay to be angry or upset or whatever they were feeling. She would help them talk through it. Or she would help them get to the place where they could calm themselves down enough to go back to class. She made all those children feel like she was *their* mom in a way, not their real mom, but *like* a mom or a grandma to them.

\* \* \*

The thing I really respected about Gloria is that her focus was on the success of the kids. She could cut through a whole bunch of *crap*, and we had a whole bunch of *crap*. She kept our focus on the prize.

\* \* \*

The connections she would make with the kids. A connection for discipline and yet a connection of love. *Tell me how you made that?* Pure interest, pure joy. So, really I think she enjoys all of that. Whatever kind of connection there is, she's going to put her sleeves up and muck in it, whether it's a joyful one or an unpleasant one.

## Intellectual Stimulation

Leadership is risky business. One can go from *hero to zero* with one bad decision, or what I often say to people, *I'm only as good as my last good decision*. Because alas, in the arena of public opinion, that is how institutional memory tends to work. Schools are institutions too, and can be very unforgiving when it comes to change. Couple that with a stubborn, complacent culture, and it will often keep good ideas and good teachers suppressed. That is why, "The most important and the most difficult job of the school-based reformer is to change the prevailing culture" (Barth, 2001, p. 197). The duty of the transformational leader is to look at problems with a mindset of curiosity and change and "look at problems in a different way, and to find innovative solutions for problems" (Yukl, 1999, p. 289). "Transformational leadership incorporates an open architecture dynamic into processes of situation evaluation, vision formulation, and patterns of implementation" (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 188).

Implementation of innovation is the very definition of risk, but yields the greatest rewards.

To learn is to risk; to lead others toward profound levels of learning is to risk; to promote personal and organizational renewal is to risk. To create schools hospitable to human learning is to risk. In short, the career of the lifelong learner and of the school-based reformer is the life of the risk-taker. (Barth, 2001, p. 290)

I believe Gloria's whole life is about being a creative problem solver. Clearly she was a very clever child and was always thinking, always dreaming. She said once that she was a shy girl and did not talk much, but she was *mindful*. One of Dr. Mitchell's strength is her keen observation and ability to quickly formulate a course of action. She attributes that to her mother, who modeled that strategy in Mr. Bronson's classroom, which was *assess the situation and be ready to problem solve*. And she continues to apply that approach in every educational role she

has ever been in since. Basically she is resolved to constantly find a better way to teach students. Did that impose a risk? Absolutely. Were the risks worth it? Absolutely. She invests in people and empowers them to take risks on behalf of kids. One teacher reminded me that Gloria “wouldn’t just hand it to you, but she would set up the *guideposts* to help you get there.”

\* \* \*

I also like the way she would help you come around to it. Like you would have a quandary or a problem in the classroom with a child, or whatever. And you would start talking about it and she would ask the right questions, like a counselor or therapist. You would walk around the issue and then finally you’d realize, *Oh yeah, this is the problem and this is what I need to do!* She would just help you get to that place.

\* \* \*

Gloria has this great vision to accomplish goals. She was well versed in what’s happening in education and was willing to try new things and she’s well connected with a lot of the leaders and shakers in the community. I think the nice thing was if you had an idea to make things better, she would support the teachers with that. She wouldn’t dictate it. If you had an idea that you wanted to try, she would let you try it and she would support you in that role. It just validated what you did and made you feel good for working hard.

Another important distinction that separates Gloria from other leaders is her collaborative approach in tackling problems or issues. “In reality, leadership is more about helping people understand the problems they face, helping them manage these problems” even if it means “helping them learn to live with them” (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 122). So really, it did not have to

be her idea, or her way. She just wants to be sure that there *is* a way to manage the problem, whatever it may be.

\* \* \*

There's a quality about her that expected to be met half way. She expected the person to be ready and available for whatever was going to happen. She projected that energy which is, *I need something, you go find it, then we're going to do this, then we're going to do that.* And there was no question that she was in charge. But there was also no question that she was incredibly generous in that same moment. There was compassion in that, an acknowledgement of humanity, but there was an expectation of a positive response. And that was remarkable, that she was unprotected and commanding at the same time.

\* \* \*

I have been asked some direct and difficult questions by Gloria over the years. I don't know why she trusted me right away, but she did. And we had so much of the same vision of the way things should be for kids, and families that we're usually in harmony on what matters. But occasionally I will say, "No, that's not it." And I always forget that she was my boss when I did that, because ordinarily, I wouldn't speak to a boss like that.

But it didn't feel like that to me, I felt like she and I were colleagues, trying to accomplish the same thing. So if this is not going to take us there, then we need to talk about it and do something different. I've always been happy that I could speak to her so directly without regard to her feelings or how she was going to take it, or her ego, or that might not be what she wanted. And I've never had a boss I could do that with. It was all about the kids. So as long as we can stay focused on that, we can say anything.

## **Idealized Influence**

Idealized influence speaks about the school leader modeling the behavior that she would expect from every individual involved at the school, from the students, to the staff, to the families. Because without clear leadership that is not modeled and communicated at every level, a *weak culture* emerges, which results in “a malaise in schools characterized by a lack of understanding of what is to be accomplished and a lack of excitement for accomplishment itself” (Sergiovanni, 1984, p. 7). The transformational leader then, “displays role model behaviors for followers through exemplary personal achievements and character or behavior” (Sosik & Dionne, 1997, p. 455).

It is without a doubt that Dr. Mitchell sets the tone for the school or organization. She works hard, long hours, and in the opinion of many, to the detriment of her own health. For sure, no one questions her commitment, or her resolve. But like her ability to inspire, or to care for the individual, or think of creative solutions, it all comes down to how she models the behavior to achieve results. She does this without ever losing sight of the students. Reeves (2009) speaks about authentic change as communicated not just with words, but that “leaders speak most clearly with their actions” (p. 39). One teacher recalls that, “In making decisions, Gloria always asked, ‘What is best for kids?’ They always came first.” Another remembers, “I think she even used to say that everyone is responsible for every child. Like we’re all responsible for all of them. That was a big part of it.”

\* \* \*

She was not just a placeholder in the office. She was a visible principal out and happening with the students. She got out of her office. I think that was the biggest thing

about her. She would stand in front of the school and say *hello* to the children in the morning and *good bye* to them in the afternoon.

\* \* \*

When she came into our classrooms she didn't come in with a clipboard ready to take notes that set her apart from us, or apart from the kids. I remember her in a nice tailored suit one day coming in. My kids were making butter. She came in and she immediately, *in her suit*, just laid down on the rug with some kid who was shaking up cream in a baby bottle, trying to make cream!

I just looked at her in awe. Here's this person who has this authority over me, and in this position. She didn't care if there were *boogers* on the rug. She was willing to get right down there with the kids! I just loved that about her.

\* \* \*

This is what is so unique about Gloria. It's always about the kids and we have this collective sense of, it's not a word, but *mother hen-ness*, *father hen-ness*, whatever. We all sort of looked at these as our kids and we all felt a mutual sense of responsibility for them but we took our direction from Gloria where all that was concerned.

### **Leadership Challenges**

Any respectable leader is reflective because as one leads, one usually has a desire to improve. That is the nature of transformational leaders; they are always evolving and refining their craft. Focus group participants were asked, *What do you believe is a leadership challenge of Dr. Mitchell?* The question was quickly followed with the assurance that all responses are completely anonymous. One person said, "During my experience of working with Gloria I don't

believe she had limitations per se. They were only temporary obstacles!” Another said that she is “outrageous at times” when it came to student discipline. But it was quickly followed:

\* \* \*

It was always very effective and it always worked really well and I would be like... I could have never done those things or handled them like her, but *she* could. And probably because the kids deep down knew she really loved them and cared about them and was trying to teach them a lesson or something.

\* \* \*

The other piece I witnessed was that Gloria invested a lot in everybody she touched. She cared very deeply about everybody. I don't know that I hold that as a weakness except that it was a vulnerability about her. That her heart was in it too. There's always a great deal at stake for her.

Some respondents did mention that Gloria's *style* or *delivery* is her limitation, offering that certain situations or decisions “might have been better accepted or heard if the message had been delivered in a different manner.” But those same limitations are also sometimes portrayed as strengths, such as being *strong* or *caring too much*, or being *too passionate*. But because she cares so much, one commented, “Dr. Mitchell is a person who cares deeply and thus can be hurt deeply.”

\* \* \*

There were times with Gloria where she had such strong opinions. I didn't always see eye to eye with her, and I don't know that anybody ever did see eye to eye with her on *everything*. And when she would *piss you off*, it was something that would just sometimes make you seethe. And it was because she is a person of very strong feelings.



\* \* \*

I would say, we know how matter of fact that Gloria is. She is a *straight shooter* and that's why everyone loves her. I wouldn't call it a *limitation*, but she also has to have the filter of letting people to get to know her just a little bit before she smacks them in the face with the hard truth. But I understand that when people need to be smacked in the face and get that hard truth, then *it is what it is*.

And she doesn't allow a lot of wait time. But I know that is her MO [modus operandi]. Like a lot of us, we have this sense of urgency so sometimes it's really my way or the highway. But maybe with a little bit of wait time, they will be able to make those transitions. They may come around just a bit later, but maybe we can give them a little bit of more personal time, more attention to get them to where they need to go and not lose potential allies or conduits for the work that needs to be done.

I don't know. *I piss a whole bunch of people off too, you know?* And we are the products of [Gloria].

But the most repeated challenge, or limitation, that was shared by participants regarded her health. Almost all responded that it is something they have shared with Gloria before, but wanted to make sure she hears it again. One participant said that her "driven-ness at the expense of her health is always of concern."

\* \* \*

She works too darn hard. There are actually two things not well enough. One is she, even though she has incredible delegation skills, it's still too much for one person and she keeps doing it. And if somebody needs her, she's available, always. Always. And

she's not well. This is not good for her. I don't know, I can't tell her to stop. I get it, that's who she is and that's how she lives. But I don't want to lose her.

\* \* \*

I worry about her health as a limitation. And she was always very quiet about it, but I think she's had health issues for a long time and kept it pretty quiet. So I do worry about that.

\* \* \*

I think Gloria is so accustomed to taking care of so many people that she often times neglects to take care of herself sufficiently. I know she has a lot of different health issues and I would like to see her take better care of herself. I don't know all of her personal business, but folks will share with you what they want to share. Gloria is human like anybody else, so she doesn't want people to worry about her.

### **Metaphors of Leadership**

In preparation for the interviews, I sent each of the participants a list of questions so that they could prepare their thoughts. One question I asked was, *If you could think of any metaphor to describe Dr. Mitchell, what would it be? And Why?* What was astonishing to me as the researcher, participants from different focus groups, schools, and districts had similar responses. The shared metaphors were, *Force of Nature* and *Energizer Bunny* to illustrate Dr. Mitchell's leadership attributes. Interestingly, more people used animals to represent their metaphor. For myself, I said that Dr. Mitchell is a *locomotive*. She has a goal and vision so you either need to get on board, or get out of the way and off the tracks! Oh, and also because locomotives are *black, bold, and beautiful*.

## Force of Nature

I think of her as a *force of nature*. She always seemed to be so aware of exactly what she wanted. She knew what direction, or what she was going to do, or what she was going to say. I never felt she was at a loss for words. She was maybe always thinking one step ahead of us. And I don't know what the word is for that, but I always felt like that she was so ready to move on, and embrace what was going on, and just take it all in.

\* \* \*

I think she is a *force of nature*, or a *human dynamo*. By that I mean she's the hub of any gathering. It doesn't matter who's in the room, she's *the one* somehow. And the ideas emanate from her and the energy emanates from her and she draws people in and challenges them to use their strengths for the benefit of children and each other.

\* \* \*

I think of her as a *fireball*, like a *forest fire*. A forest fire can clear land. It can exact incredible change on the landscape. Like hundreds of years ago, when people wanted to enrich their soil, they would burn it. Then they would rototill the ash into the soil to make the soil richer for a new growth. That's sort of how I see her. She could cut you down to nothing and yet at the same time she knew how to grow people.

## Energizer Bunny

One participant, in reference to the *Energizer Bunny*, said, "She always seemed ready for the next thing. *Always* prepared and ready to go. She seemed never to tire. Another said, "Gloria Mitchell is the *spark* behind the Energizer Bunny. It takes a spark to make power move. She is a creative force, a mover and a shaker, always in motion."

## **Lion**

I think of her as a *lion*, a leader that is watching and organizing it all, but not necessarily doing it all. But allowing the team to do the work that they can do and always being the protector. She's a very charismatic, powerful, igniter of attention and focus.

## **Queen Bee**

Gloria is the *Queen Bee*. We know how it is and the reproductive cycle of bees. You have all the worker bees and then you have one lone female that is spawning all these worker bees. And they go to work for one specific purpose and that is to build the honeycombs and protect the hive. *And nobody messes with her.*

## **Bulldog**

Well I think she's a *bulldog* [one school mascot]. Bulldogs, you know, they can be fierce, but they can also be very loyal and very focused.

## **Lead Domino**

My metaphor is a *lead domino*. People would follow, but she would allow them to go the direction they needed to go too. She ignited it.

## **Cheerleader**

I always think of Gloria as, and it's probably like the farthest thing of what she is, but she's the team captain of the *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleading Squad*. Because she can get you out of your seat, and up off on your feet behind a cause.

## **Mt. Rainier**

Wherever I go in the city, there's *Mt. Rainier* looming in the distance, kind of imposing. And when you get closer, it's even more imposing. But once you get up there, you feel very comfortable. She's like a rock.

## The Last Word

I asked the focus group participants if they had anything they would like to say to Dr. Mitchell, but maybe never had the opportunity to do so. I asked them to imagine she was sitting in the room with us and here were their responses:

\* \* \*

What would I say that I have not already said? I think I have told her but I will also say that she's the best boss I've ever had, and that I try to channel her in my work. And that she's changed my life. She truly changed my life. And so I feel very grateful that I had the opportunity to spend that time with her, to learn from her.

\* \* \*

I know I thanked Gloria many times for her fine leadership and for being a friend, but I would never hesitate to say it again. She had a special way of bringing out the best in everyone. There was deep respect for Gloria by staff, parents, and teachers.

\* \* \*

If I was going to say one thing to Gloria it would be, *you made such a difference in my life*. And I could see her have that same impact and effect on so many other people, educators, and kids. That's, I'm sure she knows, but if I had the guts, I would cry telling her that. I couldn't say it without getting teary. But she did make such a difference in so many lives.

\* \* \*

I just want her to know how much I enjoyed working for her. The purpose that we did together, not that I did on my own, but that we did *together*. And that it was a true

gift; one that I wish would circle back. But it won't, right? It won't. So, I myself, and those I work with, I think try to carry that forward. That's very hard.

\* \* \*

I think the fact we had her as a principal when we were fairly new to this career, in some ways, it was a really good thing that she was our principal so early on. Because we had an example of what an amazing leader was. But it's made all the other principals look so bad, you know?

Another participant quickly chimed in, "I would say it has ruined it for me."

Another concurred and said, "Yeah, it's true."

\* \* \*

There will never be someone with the charisma and the leadership ability that she had that now it just feels like a period of years. I just try to hang on to that sense of vision that she instilled within the staff. Even if everyone else wasn't there and didn't know her, I feel like we got to go to the party. All these years later, when we see each other. We all know, *we were at the party! We were there.* We were there with her. A unifying event that hasn't happened again.

\* \* \*

I would say, she gave me the gift of being able to look and see the good things in all people, especially children. I never had a child in my room that I felt I can't help this kid, or that I can't do something for him. And I've had some really amazing children over the years. I could always see the little spark in them or the little something, I never gave up. *She modeled that for us.* She never gave up on anyone.

\* \* \*

I think she was the best person I have ever worked for and with. And I've had some good bosses, but she was the best.

\* \* \*

What's amazing is this is such a small snippet of time in her career. Imagine the impact she had when she was teaching in Alaska, or down here in Bellevue, or over in Seattle in her leadership roles over there. Think of all the people that she has touched.

\* \* \*

Thank goodness that she claims us, thank goodness she holds us accountable, and thank goodness she's an amazing gift. *Thank goodness.*

\* \* \*

Because we are believers, the way in which Gloria has been able to touch lives and move people through different phases of their lives, not just in education, but in life. It really makes you understand that there's a force, a power, greater than ourselves.

For two people from different backgrounds, from two geographical locations and get put in the same place at the same time for something dynamic to happen, just makes you think that it's not by chance. That there has to be a reason and a purpose for these different kinds of things to happen and transpire, that we can't explain. *It's the total mystery of God.*

\* \* \*

I would say thanks for *modeling excellence*. It's the way the world should be treated. Respectfully. She modeled all of that.

\* \* \*

I think that there's no way in this lifetime that I could ever thank her enough for what she's given me. Because what she's given me has allowed me to give to not just my family, I mean it obviously was a transformation for my wife and my marriage and my children. I know that I would not be in the place I am now if it had not been for her. She saw it.

And I just couldn't thank her enough for it. I wish there was some way...

I know she would say, *You're repaying me for carrying on the work.*



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

*Awareness is not a giver of solace—it is just the opposite. It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed. They are not seekers after solace. They have their own inner serenity (Greenleaf et al., 2002, p. 41).*

#### Introduction

Dr. Gloria Mitchell has an inner strength and an inner serenity that permeates everything she says and does. There is never a casual meeting or conversation with Gloria, because she forces you to be fully present and ready to be challenged. She is fully aware and fully awake when it comes to leadership and life. Her identity as a woman of color



responds to situations that are not about race, or *being Black*, but as she said, it is about *being human*. Throughout Dr. Mitchell's life, she understands the feeling of being on the outside and dismissed by others, perhaps because of her shyness, being *tongue-tied* or having the darkest skin in her family, and living poor on *the other side, of the other side, of the tracks*. She had to fight for her own self-identity and worth, which she learned through key individuals, beginning with her mother, Ms. Jesse Mae Anderson. But each person, each event, each experience, each

milestone in her life helped create her authentic pathway to leadership. Each laid down a solid foundation of core values that acted as stepping-stones in Gloria's life.

From her life stories, it can be argued that she was *awakened* to the injustices not only from White people, but also from Black people because she was born with darker skin. She was *awakened* to those who tried to pigeonhole her from pursuing her dream to go to college and become a teacher. She *awakened* when White supremacists disrespected her elders. And being fully awake, she could no longer be the same. And that awareness and perception then began to agitate and disturb her consciousness. And her sense of duty also began to grow within because she was *too aware, too awake, and too strong* to passively sit idle when injustice was abundant. To Gloria, it is all very *black and white*, quite literally and figuratively.

People who come into contact with Dr. Mitchell either appreciate her candor and keen insight, or they become uncomfortable. Gloria has a presence about her that you know you do not want to mess around or waste her time. So you better know what you want to say and say it quickly and succinctly! Grownups, in Gloria's presence, learn to take off their hats inside the building, mind their language and use words like, *Yes Ma'am*. I used to tell people that regarding Gloria, *You either love her, or you love her more*. But even though she is always actively working on something, always one step ahead of everyone else, or on the move, we have seen and heard that she makes time for people. That is one of her most endearing qualities. You feel like you are the most important person at that one moment of time.

She definitely does not beat around the bush with me, mince words, or sugar coat anything. To be honest, sometimes I wished that she did. But it is precisely what I need to hear at that moment, not what I want to hear. And there were many moments throughout my career

where it pivoted because of Gloria and her wise counsel. I have never once doubted her genuine care and love for me.

The idea of *family, identity, awareness, values, and convictions* cannot be conveniently separated. One's values are forged through formative years of trial and error, disappointments and setbacks, and the *school of life*. But eventually, when one stays the course, and stays true to themselves, and to their calling, out of the crucible comes a defined and refined sense of self. Who Gloria is today, her leadership values and style are not something that was learned in a book, or in a school, but learned through her life experiences.

The purpose of this study was to examine effective leadership strategies through the oral history of one educational leader. Using an oral history approach, the research highlighted the lifelong journey of Dr. Gloria Mitchell and how her childhood values shaped her leadership values as an adult. The study chronicled her life from her early, formative years as a young Black woman, to her rise as a leading educator.

It was asserted that through an oral history methodology, one person's story is valid and that  $n = 1$ , is as powerful as  $n = 100$ . While it is difficult to claim if one's life story is understood, then all can be understood, let us be reminded that "life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).

### **Connecting the Dots: Framing Leadership**

Gloria leads from an inner strength that has been identified as her core values. Through extensive interviews focused on her life, we have come to better understand that the Dr. Mitchell we see today has been a *work in progress* and a culmination of a life lived with purpose. And it all started with humble beginnings in her childhood home and community.

Embedded in the title of this research, *Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Modeling Excellence in Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*, it was my assumption and current belief that Dr. Mitchell is an exceptional educational leader, and that there is much that can be learned from her life story. There is no question of her curricular competence, or pedagogical practice, and systemic success sustained through her decades of effective years of service in public education. Even to this present day, in her role as Educational Consultant, Gloria still sparks with excitement as she works with educators around planning and design. When it comes to systems, she definitely sees the big picture and can help others build strategies to achieve goals. It is her gift. It is her passion.

Dr. Mitchell's approach to leadership is definitely transformational and has similar attributes to other effective leaders, but she has a rhythm and style uniquely her own. And while she serves as one model of leadership, she is not the only one. The intention of this research is to not be *prescriptive*, or deliver a *step-by-step manual* on how to be a values-driven leader from the inside out. Rather, this research provides *guideposts*, as one focus group participant so aptly described Gloria's leadership style. Guideposts serve as points of reference and offer direction. When several guideposts are established and are connected, they can help create a frame for leadership.

### **Leadership Guideposts: The *Be* Attitudes**

When I asked Gloria to describe herself with one word she said, *Resilient*. And quickly added that it's *an action word*. It made me pause and consider who she is as a leader and as a person. It is quite true that there is nothing passive about Dr. Mitchell. Her whole life experience is one of action and how those actions set a course of other actions, like a ripple on the water's

surface from a single thrown stone. Her life and career demonstrate that when one is compelled into action on behalf of others, the ripple effect is endless.

Clearly, there are so many rich experiences that help define who Gloria is and there are so many lessons that can be drawn from them. As I poured over the data, some consistent themes were gleaned that will act as the *guideposts* to help frame Dr. Mitchell's impact as an educational leader. It is not an exhaustive list, but one that will further deliver insight and discussion to the bigger conversation of models of values-driven and transformational leadership. The five *Be Attitude guideposts* are listed below and will be discussed further in the next section:

1. Be Authentic
2. Be Unconventional
3. Be Ready
4. Be Serving
5. Be Present

### **Guidepost 1: Be Authentic**

Authenticity is a hallmark of who Dr. Mitchell is as a person and as a school leader. The entire premise of this research was predicated on the fact that one must lead from the inside out. It stems from an inner set of core values that define who you are as a person. Said another way, "The entire concept of authenticity goes to the heart of what it means to be human" (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012, p. 18). In order to lead, I believe one must have an understanding of who they are within the context of oneself. Beard (2013), in her writings about authentic leadership states, "Authenticity as a concept can be traced back to the ancient Greek aphorism 'know thyself.' 'Knowing thyself' encompasses the understanding of self—motives, morals, and thought—so well that the understanding extends to aspects of human behavior" (p. 1018).

The common mistake in leadership is to shift and change from one stance to another, to pander to the clamoring voices that only seek their own agendas. In order to silence those voices, one must develop their own. Kouzes and Posner (2003), in their study of leadership, write, “If you don’t find your authentic voice, you’ll end up with a vocabulary that belongs to someone else” (p. 29). Dr. Mitchell learned to *find her voice* and used it on behalf of others. She implores, *No matter what you do, tell the truth. It doesn’t have to always be politically correct, it doesn’t have to be flattering, but it does have to be truthful.*

Her authenticity as a leader drove her to challenge the current mindset when it came to educational excellence. It did not matter if you were the Superintendent, the Mayor, or the Governor, if you needed to hear Gloria’s truth, she would let you know. Was it too much at times? Did it come at a cost? She will admittedly say there could have been a better way to get her point across. And because she spoke her truth, there were consequences. But in the end, truth is truth. And the more she spoke, the more others benefited. Authenticity has that quality.

Throughout Dr. Mitchell’s career, she has interacted with literally thousands of students and families, and hundreds of staff members. My experience and those of my colleagues who participated in this study have greatly benefited by her authentic style of leadership. It kept the focus on what is most important, and that is the education of all children, first and foremost.

## **Guidepost 2: Be Unconventional**

*Unconventional* is defined by Merriam-Webster as “not bound by or in accordance with convention” or “being out of the ordinary” (Unconventional, n.d.). Without question, Gloria is an unconventional educational leader who went against the norm. One of the focus group participants referred to Dr. Mitchell as a *rare breed*, one who spoke her conscience. In fact, authenticity is naturally coupled with being unconventional because when one stands for core

values and truths, they usually separate themselves from others. After all, she was the bold principal that highlighted all the emails from the Superintendent and then pushed *delete* so that her staff was not bothered by unnecessary requirements, or *crap* as Gloria referred.

She also sits in good company. Gladwell (2011) wrote an entire book filled with stories about unconventional people titled, *Outliers*, with the observation:

People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot. (p. 19)

Another observation made by Gladwell is that beyond natural talent and opportunity is the fact that everything takes time. He devotes a whole chapter called the *10,000-Hour Rule* (Gladwell, 2011, p. 35). Gloria is a student of her craft and has been engaged in leadership change theory as a participatory action researcher arguably from her youth, shattering the *10,000-Hour Rule* by the time she was in elementary school!

Unconventional wisdom gave Gloria the gumption to apply for a half million-dollar grant to bring Head Start to her community as a high school student. She learned how to type and not only was awarded the grant, but managed the operation of the program, including curriculum development, inventory, scheduling, and dealing with personnel issues as a teenager! Looking back to that experience, Gloria said, *If you don't have fear you don't know it's a big deal. You don't know it's a big deal if you haven't been given these internal fears about something.*

Gertrude Williams was the subject of an oral history titled, *Education as My Agenda: Gertrude Williams, Race, and the Baltimore Public Schools*, by Robinson (2005), and served as a mentor text for my research. I found that there were many similarities between Mrs. Williams

and Dr. Mitchell. Both broke race barriers as Black educators in their respective communities. Both put children first and kept school officials, politicians, staff, and families accountable to improve education. Both were unconventional.

Whatever their historical impact, Gertrude and those who supported her agenda paid a price for not conforming to the status quo. The more she succeeded in establishing an authentic model of democratic governance, the more she annoyed bureaucrats and lawmakers wedded to centralized school management. (Robinson, 2005, p. 225)

Being unconventional drives the agenda so that the focus steers back on the most important aspect of education, the students. To be unconventional means understanding your authentic self and being prepared to stand on those beliefs and to be ready to move others into action.

### **Guidepost 3: Be Ready**

Learning from the stories of her past, it is as if Gloria's entire childhood, upbringing, and experiences were a lifelong preparation for her role as an educational leader. She knew what it was like to be poor and shunned. She understood the value of education even when no one else around her supported her dream. She put herself in positions of opportunity so that when the time came, she would be ready.

She was taught the value of education and how and when to make a stand for oneself through her mother in poor Mr. Bronson's classroom. It was there that Gloria's mother modeled how to quickly assess a problem and develop a strategy and plan of action. It was also that event that her mother taught her a mighty lesson. Gloria recalls, *That for me said, you don't have to fight every battle, but know when it's time to fight and have all your tools together.* And there were battles to be fought. But she was ready.



When it was time to make a stand against the powers of racism in her hometown, she was prepared because of what she learned in college. She took the lead, got organized, and peacefully demonstrated against the racist storeowner who disrespected her elders. For such a time as that, even in the face of imminent danger, she was not only willing, but also ready to lead.

When her teachers were treating a class of immigrant children as *the enemy*, she was ready to fight for them and provide a safe environment and an education they deserved. When a librarian did not provide equal access to books, she was ready with a plan. Because she knew what it was like to be on the *outside* looking in.

To her detriment, she stood for truth against her Superintendent and gave a voice to those on *the other side* of the door. She was *always* ready to make a stand. And instead of allowing the past injustices to plague her and her negative experiences mire her, she embraced it. She prepared herself for the next opportunity to make things right, and to give back. She gave back by serving others and being a servant to all.

#### **Guidepost 4: Be Serving**

Servant leadership is not about being servile or a sign of weakness by any stretch of the imagination. It is a strength and a sign of resilience. To steward others is one of the highest forms of humanity because it puts others first. It is no surprise that the act of caring for others, or “individual concern” (Sosik & Dionne, 1997) had such a significant impact to the focus group members. Each had a specific story of how Dr. Mitchell went out of her way to show personal care for them. The interesting part was each of us thought it was just us, who received that special care. Through shared stories, we came to find that she showed the same care, love, compassion, and service to everyone! It made us wonder how she could make the time for all of us, on top of her own family, her health, and personal needs.

The leadership that counts, in the end, is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people. It is a morally based leadership—a form of stewardship. (Sergiovanni, 2013, p. 373)

She had a servant's heart that always led by example first and built a culture of authentic teamwork and collaboration. The concept of *Each One, Help One* came from all her educational experiences over time as she observed people serving one another throughout her schools. Dr. Mitchell commented, *I think it's more about each of us having a responsibility for supporting each other, if we care about each other. And that's what I did. If you do the right thing, people will come up for you.*

Dr. Mitchell identified Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership*, as the model of her leadership style. As I read his words, I gained a deeper appreciation of the profound yet simple fact that a servant-leader is *first a servant*. The order is important because so often the focus is on the leader. Greenleaf (2002) explains:

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived? (p. 27)

Gloria modeled a servant-first model of leadership, creating a culture of care and individualized concern for others. I can confidently say as a result, I *did* grow as person, I *became* healthier, wiser, freer, *more* autonomous, and *developed* a desire to serve others. It is an

important lesson regarding leadership that must not be forgotten. After all, education and the schools that we build are all about people.

### **Guidepost 5: Be Present**

Be present and do not forget to put yourself in the picture. This is the most practical of the guideposts presented, and arguably the most difficult. For the very nature of a servant-leader is to play a sacrificial role, always putting the needs of others before your own. Hard, life-long lessons that Gloria reflects on are the many sacrifices she has made for others. Whether monetarily or physically, the leadership demand was great and has taken a toll on her life. Almost all the leadership challenges that the focus group members identified regarding Gloria was about her physical health and how she gives, and gives, and gives. But at the same time, it is the very thing that makes her such a unique individual and an outlier model of leadership. Just as Greenleaf implores us to create *healthier, wiser, and freer* persons, this must be reciprocated.

We are to be fully present, but to not forget to be a part of that picture. Gloria reminds us, *Always remember to put you somewhere in that picture that you build for others. For so, so many years I forgot that.* And the balance, or perhaps tension is always in play because if one desires to be authentic, unconventional, ready, a servant, and present, there will be a cost. That is the crux of transformational leadership.

Starratt (2004) wrote a piece called *Presence* in the context of educational leadership. He addresses the connection between virtues and authenticity and has found the concept of *presence*, or to be in relation with others, is what makes us human. He writes:

There is a fundamental link between the virtue of responsibility and the virtue of authenticity that activates the two and brings them into a dynamic relationship. It is the virtue of presence. In the absence of this virtue, a person's authenticity, no matter how

well developed, may miss the leadership implications of events in his or her organizational setting. The sense of moral responsibility to respond to a certain situation or event grows in proportion to our being present to that situation or event. By being present to that situation or event, I bring myself to fuller attention. I bring not simply a disinterested curiosity, but myself, my whole self to confront what is going on. By allowing the fuller presence of the situation or event to speak to me, to be taken inside so that I can understand it, I can begin to discern what the situation or event asks of me. By bringing my fuller presence, I bring sensitivities that have been developed through education and experience; if I am a professional of some kind, I bring that expertise into the dialogue with the situation or event. If I am an authentic person, then the situation or event suggests a response that is consistent with the person I am, the values I embrace, the lessons I've learned, the commitments I've made. (Starratt, 2004, p. 60)

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

Principal leadership programs must shift their focus from compliance-driven taskmasters, that only produce and reproduce transactional leaders. Of course, the day-to-day operation of a quality school does require a great deal of attention and varying degrees of compliance. Because without systems in place to address academic performance, organizational structures, and fiduciary responsibilities, schools, and students in particular, suffer. What this study argues for is a better understanding and better balance of educational leadership. Bono and Judge (2004) evaluated transformational versus transactional leadership and discovered that they can be learned traits, and state that little is known about “the content of leadership training in universities and organizations,” concluding that “this is an important area for future research” (p. 906). We must resist the temptation to remain in the doldrums of dated leadership models

because it is safe. Instead, the emphasis for potential school leaders must be on the on-going development of transformational leaders who operate from a set of core values from the inside out. The rewards will far outweigh the risks.

More research must also be centered on the role of mentorship in the development of educational leadership programs. I am fortunate enough to have had many mentors along my career pathway who provided me with support I needed as a novice administrator. Sometimes the support was technical, or transactional in nature. But most of the support that mattered most dealt with the *art* of leadership, not the *science*. And if you are fortunate enough, you will have a mentor that supports you as a person and touches your very being. For me, Gloria is that person.

To many people, I have described Gloria as my second mother. After all, how else can it be explained when she gets on the classroom intercom and says, *Boy, get down to my office*. I still remember the laughter and smiles of my students as I walked the long hallway to her office. Yes, I spent many hours in Dr. Mitchell's office, not because I was in trouble, *debatable*, but because she wanted to teach me something. She understands the power and value of people and that leadership is a shared endeavor. And what I received in those moments with her were some of the best professional development trainings for future leadership that I have ever had since.

Perhaps the most important aspect of a mentor/mentee relationship is that it does not just end when you obtain a license or a degree, and step into your first principalship. That is the difference between a *program-centered* versus *people-centered* philosophy. Programs end and the level of commitment that is invested in an individual ceases to exist. But when there is an authentic person-to-person connection, *a presence*, the investment is forever. This is how we can turn the facts and truths around about educational leadership into a positive upward trend towards satisfaction and efficacy.

## **Reflecting as a Researcher and Practitioner**

My own self-discovery and growth has been re-rooted as a result of this study. Admittedly, I have been one of those 500 principals who were surveyed by the MetLife study that felt overwhelmed and overloaded with the demands of school leadership (Markow et al., 2013). In fact, I was in my first three years of my first principal assignment and struggled about whether I would leave the profession. I felt alone, isolated, and discouraged by the demands of the job, which kept me away from my young growing family. Gloria was always there to listen, and then help set me back on the narrow path. She did not make the demands of the principalship go away, but she did come by my side and provided perspective through her words of experience and wisdom. But even more important, she offered her gift of self. And she still does invest in me 20 years later, offering her pearls of wisdom with her exhortation, *Ed Noh! You got this. You know what to do!* Then, invariably, she would end the conversation with something like, *Now go put on your big boy pants and go do the right thing!*

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, models of leadership are sorely needed. The facts tell us that more and more principals feel the job demands are causing more stress, and satisfaction of the work is waning (Markow et al., 2013). Research reveals the truth that “the principalship itself has become overloaded in a way that makes it impossible to fulfill the promise of widespread, sustainable reform” (Fullan, 2015, p. 124).

But there are *bright spots*, individuals who have endured and successfully dodged the perennial pendulum swings in education reform. They have risen above the startling statistics, and have found ways not just to *survive*, but to *thrive*. We need to go beyond the statistics and into the schools, hearing from real people doing the real work. We need to hear more stories of

success from model leaders who have so much to teach through their lives, so that others can learn and grow. We need more oral histories of educational leaders like Dr. Gloria Mitchell. For stories have the power to rise above facts and truth, because they “live in our [our] hearts forever” (Janesick, 2010).

## CHAPTER 6

### EPILOGUE

*Dear Gloria, you've come a long way to get here. Don't stop growing now.  
The beauty of the soul is visible to others (Mitchell, 2009).*

#### Shared Memories

In the last two decades of my life, I reflect back at the special relationship between Gloria and myself. The time we were physically together was actually rather limited. Then, when my family and I moved to Hawai'i, we spoke at important dates, like birthdays, Mothers' Day, holidays, and unfortunately, whenever I was in a crisis situation at work. Each and every time we did speak, I was always so thankful because it was a way for me to connect and be reconnected. I realized that our conversations were so much more than *work-related*, they were *life-related*. Gloria knows me so well and guides me with gentleness and firmness when I need it. Looking back on the years, I would have to say it was the latter that helped me the most and caused the most growth in my life, both professionally and personally.

I wish to conclude by including a conversation between Gloria and myself that I found very special in this research process. It depicts the kind of relationship I have with Gloria and takes me back to memories of me sitting in her office, talking about *anything and everything*. The *real* interview did not yet start, but the recorder was on and like a teacher and mentor, the lessons keep on coming:

Gloria:       The thing I want to share with you, when you first talked to me you said, *Well, this is going to be quite emotional for you, Gloria*. And I thought, *Where is he coming from?* And really more than emotional, it's been reflective. And the other



thing you asked me about was did I write down any stories. And I shared with you how I wrote things that I found in books.

Here's one of them. And this one was started in 2009. And you said, *Where did I get that sense of Each one, Help one from?* I don't think it's so much about *Each one, Help one*, I think it's more about each of us having a responsibility for supporting each other if we care about each other.

And so one thing I truly, truly love is mother earth. I love digging in the dirt. It's peaceful, it brings me harmony and that has always been something even from when I was a child. Even this moment thinking about it, I smell the gardenia bush on the corner of my mom's front porch.

And I think we spoke about that some time ago about my continuously trying to grow one. Maybe it's not about me having the gardenia in my yard but about my remembering the smell, the intensity, the purpose. And I kept every weed from that plant, every bud from that plant, not one leaf turned brown on that plant. It was just God-like to have that one piece of thing that I truly loved. And I don't know if my mom was attached to it or my siblings or anyone else?

But whenever we talk or we come together, the gardenia plant comes up with my family. So apparently someone noticed that I noticed the plant, who knows?

So I was in Cincinnati, I don't remember it and it's called *Adapt the Pace of Nature: Her Secret is Patience*. And that's... well, I wrote about that. I said:

*I'd sit here in the part of Cincinnati, Ohio surrounded by people, yet alone. It is quiet within, a quiet that is unfamiliar to me.*

Having been asked to journal I did so mentally each and every day. Then it was something about my friend who had passed away. But there was a piece in here I wanted to share with you:

*Dear Gloria, you've come a long way to get here. Don't stop growing now. The beauty of the soul is visible to others.*

That's what I wrote on a Sunday. Then on Monday I said:

*Thinking and believing I was stuck, I stopped thinking about writing about that outer and moved on to writing about my inner self (Mitchell, 2009).*

Isn't that something?

Ed: It's beautiful.

Gloria: That's enough of that. I think at some point... I don't think this, I know this, that I've never accepted the fact that I was number six of twelve and had moved out of that, and it was okay. I never accepted that until maybe now, and I don't know, maybe there are snippets of times I remember that. But it's like I've always wanted to be accepted; yet I was always different. Do you know what I mean?

And folks that I interacted with over the years put me one place, where really I was still in another place. I never was educated enough, had enough beautiful clothes, and no shoes, and not enough anything that folks would just accept me where I was. Because they didn't see me there, they saw me some place else. But I was always there. It's like God-like, It's like I'm with you always.

You don't have to speak proper 90 percent of the time because you know I can get ghetto quickly. And you don't have to be dressed up with the high heels

and the make up. You could just be you. And I know I've dressed down, I've spoken ghetto-like, I've split a thousand verbs, I've walked bare feet, I've pulled weeds, I've done a lot of things just to show folks I don't think I'm better as a result of anything. I'm still with you. Not that I'm trying to be God-like, I'm just trying to be me.

And I like being there, I like that environment where I'm with the governor, and I've been with several. I have pictures with several of them, but at the same time I would go outside and play with the kids on the swings. But I liked and enjoy both environments. But other folks would view that piece of the interaction with the governor as *the thing* when to me it was just an incident. You know what I mean? So you're causing me to reflect a bit around stuff like that. But I also brought a few artifacts in case you needed them. I wanted to give you memory again.

Ed: Yes. Speaking of memory lane, look what I found at my parent's place.

Gloria: With you on my desk?

Ed: This is at that Black and White Boeing thing.

Gloria: Wow, yes!

Ed: And you took me and...

Gloria: Remember that!?

Ed: And you made me get up there and say stuff.

Gloria: Yes. I was fat, wasn't I?



Figure 6.1. Dr. Mitchell and me at a fundraiser event, circa 2002. (Ed Noh)

Ed: And then you have this classic line afterwards when they were giving these parting gifts. And we're walking up together and they just gave us one parting gift and you said, *Oh, he ain't my lover, give me one of those bags.*

Gloria: Is that right? Lovely.

Ed: I wish we had pictures of our floor seats at the Sonics game. We never took pictures of that.

Gloria: Oh, dang!

Ed: That was very special, it was October, and so we were doing our birthday thing. Okay. I don't even remember why... It was you who was the featured speaker [Boeing event], but I don't know why you made me go up there, to this day.

Gloria: Because when I'm in the stuff, I'm nervous and I probably had you go too. But I was the featured speaker probably because I was the President and Chair of the Education Board for the Museum of Flight. I always get caught up with stuff.

Ed: And your opening line... I still remember because it was the auction.

Gloria: Raise the paddle?

Ed: Bring back the paddle!

Gloria: Is that right? I did the craziest stuff. I don't remember half of it.

Ed: Well, and then there was another time, this is when the Superintendent was doing these round table meetings, and it was about the achievement gap. And you sent me down to the John Stanford Center and put me on the panel, and I had to explain how we're going to get all of our kids to 100% proficiency because of the whole No Child Left Behind thing.

Gloria: Why not?

Ed: Well, you know, it was one of those moments like, *How did Gloria get me to come down here and do this thing?!*

Gloria: Because you would do anything for me. Because I didn't actually ask you. I told you things, and you wouldn't question it and you'd go, *Okay!*

Ed: Well, it's kind of like that first time you had me as your principal designee at Lake Hills and I think I gave you every excuse in the book not to do it. And my final last straw was, *I don't think we can get a sub at this late hour.* And you said, *I already got you one.* And then I had no more excuses. I wheeled a whole big file cart down to your office, because I thought, *I don't know what principals do. I'm just going to grade papers all day and get caught up on paperwork.* And the moment I sat down, literally before I can even get settled, Ardath came in and said, *By the way, here's your schedule for the day.* And that was the...

Gloria: The beginning.

Ed: Yeah, that was the beginning.

Gloria: Is that it, really?

Ed: Because maybe you knew I was kind of hesitant.

Gloria: You've always been hesitant.

Ed: I said, *No, I don't want to do that!*

Gloria: Well, what it was, is you have a little of me in you, it's sort of like you're more servant than leader. And when you're pushed to be a leader you're apprehensive because with the leadership comes responsibility.

## ***My Last Word***

Gloria, you have forever changed my life! Thank you for seeing something in me that I could not even see for myself. Thank you for believing in me when I did not even believe in myself. Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone and opening my eyes to the possibilities of educational leadership.

You have, and always will be *a model of excellence* to me. You taught me so much more than educational leadership. You taught me how to be a better person, a better husband, father and servant to all because you taught me how to lead from the *inside out*.

My doctoral journey is a shared one with you. To me, this was so much more than a research project. This was one *small* way to say thank you and give something back to you. To put *you* in the picture!

Thank you for being my mentor, my mother, and my friend.

I love you.

~ EHN

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY  
of HAWAII<sup>o</sup>  
MĀNOA

Office of Research Compliance  
Human Studies Program

January 22, 2016

TO: Ed Noh  
Mary Hattori, Ph.D.  
Principal Investigators  
College of Education

FROM: Denise A. Lin-DeShetler, MPH, MA  
Director

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Lin-DeShetler'.

SUBJECT: CHS #23700 - "Dr. Gloria J. Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out"

This letter is your record of the Human Studies Program approval of this study as exempt.

On January 22, 2016, the University of Hawai'i (UH) Human Studies Program approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the protection of human research participants. The authority for the exemption applicable to your study is documented in the Code of Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46.101(b) (Categories 2, 4).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at <http://www.hawaii.edu/irb/html/manual/appendices/A/belmont.html>

Exempt studies do not require regular continuing review by the Human Studies Program. However, if you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from the Human Studies Program prior to implementing any changes. You can submit your proposed changes via email at [uhirb@hawaii.edu](mailto:uhirb@hawaii.edu). (The subject line should read: Exempt Study Modification.) The Human Studies Program may review the exempt status at that time and request an application for approval as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so. Signed consent forms, as applicable to your study, should be maintained for at least the duration of your project.

This approval does not expire. However, please notify the Human Studies Program when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact the Human Studies Program at 956-5007 or [uhirb@hawaii.edu](mailto:uhirb@hawaii.edu). We wish you success in carrying out your research project.

1960 East-West Road  
Biomedical Sciences Building B104  
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96822  
Telephone: (808) 956-5007  
Fax: (808) 956-8683

An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution

## Appendix B: Consent to Participate Form - Interviewee



### University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa College of Education Educational Professional Practice Ed.D.



[Date]

To: [Participant’s Name] (Interviewee)

From: Ed H. Noh (Interviewer)  
Doctoral Student in College of Education Professional Practice Ed.D.

Re: Letter of Consent

#### **Consent to Participate in an Oral History Research Project Focused on Educational Leadership**

*Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*

My name is Ed H. Noh and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education’s Ed.D. Professional Educational Practice Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH). The purpose of my research is to use case study analysis to examine the life history of a successful educational leader. The study will document the experiences (memories and commentaries) by detailing stories that will not only inform and improve my own leadership but also other educational leaders. You were selected to participate in this research project because you have led a successful educational career in each of your roles as classroom teacher, principal, district leader and consultant always serving in the best interest of students, families and communities.

**Project Description - Activities and Time Commitment:** In person interviews will take place on approximately three separate occasions at a time and place convenient to you. The interviews will last for approximately 90 to 120 minutes and will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. The interviews will be informal and conversational, as I want to get your personal recollections of your life story and leadership style.

After the interviews, all audio recordings will be transcribed into a word document. I will check and edit the transcript for accuracy. Once the transcriptions have been confirmed and organized, I will give the transcribed data to you to check for reliability and accuracy. You are free to make any changes to the transcription as you deem appropriate. I estimate that it will take you several hours to do this, depending on how many changes you indicate. I will then incorporate your revisions into the transcript and, at a later date, type the final transcript.

The plan is for me to use excerpts from the final transcript in my dissertation. It is possible that at a future date the final transcript will be distributed to libraries (or in other ways disseminated) for use by other researchers, oral historians, or the general public. Others will be permitted to use, in unpublished works, short excerpts from any of the transcriptions without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given to the interviewee (you) and the interviewer (me). At the completion of the project, I will erase the audio- recordings.



**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this project is voluntary and you may withdraw from participation at any time, up to the completion date of this project, which is expected to be Summer 2017. During the interviews, you can choose to not answer any question(s) at any time for any reason. If you disapprove of, wish to change, add to, delete, or otherwise change the transcripts or the audio file of the interviews, you may do so at any time up to the completion of this project.

**Benefits and Risks:** I believe there is no direct benefit to you in participating in this research project. However, your participation in this project might help me and other researchers learn more about school leadership as well as contribute to the record of effective school leaders. Because of the need to create an authentic record and make available to scholars and the general public a reliable historical document, it is important that your actual name appear as the interviewee on the transcript. Thus, one potential risk to you is a loss of privacy. Another potential risk is that some topics you discuss during the interviews might bring back painful or unpleasant memories. In such cases, we can take a break, skip that topic, and/or you may choose to stop participating altogether.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** As noted previously, in order to accurately document your leadership history, it is important that your name appear as the interviewee on the transcript. However, you retain the right to change, delete, or add information in the transcripts. All collected data will be kept secured in a locked office within a locked filing cabinet. All electronic documents will be on a password-protected computer. Personal information, recordings and transcribed data pertaining to the research will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Only the researcher and graduate advisor will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

**Questions:** Please contact me, Ed H. Noh, by phone at [REDACTED] or email at ednoh@hawaii.edu or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Mary Hattori by phone at [REDACTED] or email at maryh@hawaii.edu should you have any questions. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai‘i, Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007 or email at uhirb@hawaii.edu.

---

**Agreement to Participate in an Oral History Research Project  
Focused on Educational Leadership**

*Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*

*“I certify that I have read and that I understand the information in this consent form, that I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions concerning the project, and that I have been told that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without any negative consequences to me.*

Please check a box

*I agree to be digitally audio recorded.....*  YES  NO

*I agree to have my actual name appear in the results as the interviewee.....*  YES  NO

*I herewith give my consent to participate in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights.”*

Printed Name of Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*A Copy of this Consent Form will be provided to the Participant.*

## Appendix C: Consent to Participate Form – Focus Group



### University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa College of Education Educational Professional Practice Ed.D.



[Date]

To: Focus Group Participant (Interviewees)

From: Ed H. Noh (Interviewer)  
Doctoral Student in College of Education Professional Practice Ed.D.

Re: Letter of Consent

#### **Consent to Participate in an Oral History Research Project Focused on Educational Leadership**

*Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*

My name is Ed H. Noh and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education’s Ed.D. Educational Professional Practice Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH). The purpose of my research is to use case study analysis to examine the life history of a successful educational leader. The study will document the experiences (memories and commentaries) by detailing stories that will not only inform and improve my own leadership but also other educational leaders. Dr. Gloria Mitchell was selected for this study because she led a successful educational career in each of her roles as classroom teacher, principal, district leader and consultant always serving in the best interest of students, families and communities. You were selected to participate in this research project because you have firsthand knowledge and experience working with Dr. Gloria Mitchell in one capacity or another.

**Project Description - Activities and Time Commitment:** The in person interview will be at a time and place convenient to you. The interviews will last for approximately 90 to 120 minutes and will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. The interviews will be informal and conversational, as I want to get your personal recollections working with Dr. Gloria Mitchell. All comments made will be anonymous to protect you and your privacy as the participant. After the interviews, audio recordings may be transcribed into a word document and checked and edited for accuracy. I will then analyze the data at a later time and incorporate findings into the final project.

The plan is for me to use this interview for background information about my subject. It is possible that at a future date the final dissertation will be distributed to libraries (or in other ways disseminated) for use by other researchers, oral historians, or the general public. Others will be permitted to use, in unpublished works, short excerpts from any of the material without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given. At the completion of the project, I will erase all the audio- recordings.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this project is voluntary and you may withdraw from participation at any time, up to the completion date of this project, which is expected to be Summer 2017. During the interviews, you can choose to not answer any question(s) at any time for any reason. If you disapprove of, wish to change, add to, delete, or otherwise change the transcripts or the audio file of the interviews, you may do so at any time up to the completion of this project.

**Benefits and Risks:** I believe there is no direct benefit to you in participating in this research project. However, your participation in this project might help me and other researchers learn more about school leadership as well as contribute to the record of effective school leaders. If, however, you are uncomfortable with the process and research project at any time, you may withdraw from the study. Another potential risk is that some topics you discuss during the interviews might bring back painful or unpleasant memories. In such cases, we can take a break, skip that topic, and/or you may choose to stop participating altogether.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** All comments made will be anonymous to protect you and your privacy as the participant. All collected data will be kept secured in a locked office within a locked filing cabinet. All electronic documents will be on a password-protected computer. Personal information, recordings and transcribed data pertaining to the research will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Only myself, as the researcher, and my graduate advisor will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

**Questions:** Please contact me, Ed H. Noh, by phone at [REDACTED] or email at ednoh@hawaii.edu or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Mary Hattori by phone at [REDACTED] or email at maryh@hawaii.edu should you have any questions. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai‘i, Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007 or email at uhirb@hawaii.edu.

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**Agreement to Participate in an Oral History Research Project  
Focused on Educational Leadership**

*Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*

*“I certify that I have read and that I understand the information in this consent form, that I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions concerning the project, and that I have been told that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project at any time without any negative consequences to me.*

*I agree to have my interview digitally audio recorded. (Please check a box)  YES  NO*

*I herewith give my consent to participate in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights.”*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Interviewee

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*A Copy of this Consent Form will be Provided to the Participant.*

**Appendix D: Interviewee Agreement Form**



**University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa  
College of Education  
Educational Professional Practice Ed.D.**



[Date]

To: [Participant’s Name] (Interviewee)

From: Ed H. Noh (Interviewer)  
Doctoral Student in College of Education Professional Practice Ed.D.

Re: Interview Agreement

**INTERVIEWEE AGREEMENT**

I the undersigned interviewee give and grant to the interviewer all rights, title and interest to the following:

APPROVED EDITED TRANSCRIPT EXCERPTS of interviews recorded on:

[ Various Interview Dates ]

ALL BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION provided to the interviewer.

It is understood and agreed that the interviewer may utilize and authorize public use of any parts of the above for such scholarly and educational purposes as so determined by the interviewer. The interviewer currently plans to use excerpts from the final transcript in his doctoral dissertation. It is possible that at a future date the final transcript will be distributed to libraries (or in other ways disseminated) for use by other researchers, oral historians, or the general public. Others will be permitted to use, in unpublished works, short excerpts from any of the transcriptions without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given to the interviewee and the interviewer.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of the Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Interviewee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*A Copy of this Agreement will be Provided to the Interviewee*

## Appendix E: Recruitment Flyer – Focus Group



### University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa College of Education Educational Professional Practice Ed.D.



[Date]

To: Potential Participants

From: Ed H. Noh, Principal Investigator  
Doctoral Student in College of Education Professional Practice Ed.D.  
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Re: Focus Group Interview Recruitment and Participation

#### **Oral History Research Project Focused on Educational Leadership**

*Dr. Gloria Mitchell: Educational Leadership from the Inside Out*

**Purpose:** The purpose of my research is to use case study analysis to examine the life history of a successful educational leader. The study will document the experiences (memories and commentaries) by detailing stories that will not only inform and improve my own leadership but also other educational leaders. Dr. Gloria Mitchell was selected for this research study because of her successful educational career in each of her roles as classroom teacher, principal, district leader and consultant, always serving in the best interest of students, families and communities.

You are eligible for this research study if:

- You are over 18 years of age
- You have firsthand knowledge and experience working with Dr. Gloria Mitchell in various capacities. Your memories and stories will be used to complement the overall research, offering a more holistic and complete picture of the subject.

**Activities and Time Commitment:** The focus group interview will be at a time and place convenient to you. The interviews will last for approximately 90 to 120 minutes and will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. The interviews will be informal and conversational with topics and questions centered on educational leadership.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** All comments made will be anonymous to protect you and your privacy as the participant. All collected data will be kept secured in a locked office within a locked filing cabinet. All electronic documents will be on a password-protected computer. Personal information, recordings and transcribed data pertaining to the research will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Only myself, as the principal investigator, and my graduate advisor will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the University of Hawai‘i Human Studies Program, have the right to review research records.

**Questions:** Please contact me, Ed H. Noh, by phone at [REDACTED] or email at [ednoh@hawaii.edu](mailto:ednoh@hawaii.edu) or my dissertation advisor, Dr. Mary Hattori by phone at [REDACTED] or email at [maryh@hawaii.edu](mailto:maryh@hawaii.edu) should you have any questions. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant in this project, you can contact the University of Hawai‘i, Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007 or email at [uhirb@hawaii.edu](mailto:uhirb@hawaii.edu). *Mahalo and Aloha!*

## Appendix F: Interview Protocols – Interviewee

### Protocol to Introduce Project and Complete Consent Form (Individual Interview)

Welcome \_\_\_\_\_: Thank you for coming today.

My name is Ed H. Noh and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education's Ed.D. Professional Educational Practice Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH).

The purpose of my research is to use case study analysis to examine your life history as an identified successful educational leader. The study will document your experiences (memories and commentaries) by detailing stories that will not only inform and improve my own leadership but also other educational leaders. You were selected for this study because you led a successful educational career in each of your roles as classroom teacher, principal, district leader and consultant always serving in the best interest of students, families and communities.

As I conduct my research, I would like to find out what experiences you have had in your life that has contributed to your success as an educational leader. Your stories will help give insight to the leadership qualities necessary for school change. Your participation will also help increase the collective understanding of what makes a good leader, specifically in the field of education.

The study will be conducted as in-depth one-on-one interviews. Because of the need to create an authentic record and make available to scholars and the general public a reliable historical document, it is important that your actual name appear as the interviewee on the transcript. Thus, one potential risk to you is a loss of privacy. Another potential risk is that some topics you discuss during the interviews might bring back painful or unpleasant memories. In such cases, we can take a break, skip that topic, and/or you may choose to stop participating altogether.

*Explain the consent form at this time and ask for signature.*

Today, I, Ed H. Noh, will be facilitating the discussion and will be asking the questions. The interview will be audio digitally recorded. I will also be keeping time, observing and taking additional notes as needed.

Refreshments are on the table for you to consume throughout the discussion. Are there any questions before we begin?

#### **Research/Discussion Prompts:**

1. How would you describe your family during your childhood years?
2. Describe your childhood. What are your first memories as a child? What did you do for fun?
3. What were your hopes and dreams growing up?
4. Did you get into trouble as a child? How was discipline dealt with in your family?
5. What was your community like growing up?
6. Were there any difficulties/challenges you faced while growing up?

7. What are some family values that were instilled in you while growing up?
8. Who were the most influential people in your childhood (or life) and why?
9. What type of student were you in elementary, middle and high school?
10. Did you have a favorite teacher, coach or mentor? What is the life lesson that you have learned from them that has influenced and changed your outlook on your own life?
11. Please tell me about your family? How and where did you meet your husband?
12. Describe when you first knew you wanted to go into the field of education. What was your pathway to your career?
13. In any one of your educational positions held, what are you most proud of? What impacts do you believe you left for that organization?
14. What do you believe is your greatest strength as an education leader? What do you believe is a blind spot or limitation?
15. Please share one significant story (personal or professional) that you will always remember about your life. Why is that story so important to you?
16. From the beginning of your career until now, what is the first word that comes to your mind when you think about the purpose of education? Please explain.
17. If you could go back in time and know what you know today, what, if anything would you want to say to Dr. Gloria J. Mitchell as she began her career?
18. If you could think of any metaphor to describe yourself, what would it be and why?
19. Is there anything else that you would like to share that has not yet been asked?

**Potential Follow-up Prompts:**

1. What do you believe are essential attributes of an educational leader?
2. What advice would give to new educational leaders coming into the field?
3. How has the educational profession changed from the time you entered into the field and since you retired?
4. Where do you believe we are heading as a nation regarding education?

Any last questions before we depart?

I appreciate your consideration and assistance in conducting this study.

## **Appendix G: Interview Protocols – Focus Group**

### **Protocol to Introduce Project and Complete Consent Form (Focus Group Interview Participants)**

Welcome \_\_\_\_\_: Thank you for coming today.

My name is Ed H. Noh and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education's Ed.D. Professional Educational Practice Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH).

The purpose of my research is to use case study analysis to examine the life history of a successful educational leader. The study will document the experiences (memories and commentaries) by detailing stories that will not only inform and improve my own leadership but also other educational leaders. Dr. Gloria J. Mitchell was selected for this study because she led a successful educational career in each of her roles as classroom teacher, principal, district leader and consultant always serving in the best interest of students, families and communities.

You were selected to participate in this research project because you have firsthand knowledge and experience working with Dr. Gloria J. Mitchell in one capacity or another. As I conduct my research, I would like to find out what experiences you have while working with Dr. Mitchell. Your stories will help give insight to the leadership qualities of Dr. Mitchell. Your participation will help increase the collective understanding of what makes a good leader, specifically in the field of education.

The study will be conducted in focus group sessions and in-depth key informant interviews (as needed). All data collected in this study will be kept entirely confidential. Your name will never be publicly associated with this experiment and your participation will be kept anonymous. If you become uncomfortable during the discussion and/or process, we can take a break, skip the question, or stop the interview. As participation in this research project is voluntary, you can withdraw your permission at any point during the project.

*Explain the consent form at this time and ask for signatures.*

Today, I, Ed H. Noh, will be facilitating the discussion and will be asking the questions. The interview will be audio digitally recorded. I will also be keeping time, observing and taking additional notes as needed.

Refreshments are on the table for you to consume throughout the discussion. Are there any questions before we begin?

#### **Research/Discussion Prompts:**

1. In what capacity did you know Dr. Gloria J. Mitchell? What was your role?
2. Describe your first impression of Dr. Mitchell.
3. What is the first word that comes to your mind when you think about Dr. Mitchell as a person? What about as an educational leader? Please explain.
4. Please share one significant story (personal or professional) that you will always remember about Dr. Mitchell. Why is that story so important to you?



5. Is there a life lesson that you have learned from Dr. Mitchell that has influenced and changed your outlook on your own life?
6. In your specific school setting or position, what positive/negative impacts do you believe Dr. Mitchell had?
7. What do you believe is Dr. Mitchell's greatest strength as an education leader?
8. What do you believe is a blind spot or limitation of Dr. Mitchell?
9. What is one thing that you wish you had said directly to Dr. Mitchell but never had the opportunity to do so?
10. If you could think of any metaphor to describe Dr. Mitchell, what would it be and why?
11. Is there anything else that you would like to share about Dr. Mitchell that has not yet been asked?

**Potential Follow-up Prompts:**

1. What do you believe are positive attributes of an educational leader?
2. If you were under Dr. Mitchell's guidance, how has she helped you develop as a professional?
3. Share an example if Dr. Mitchell, in your personal experience, went above and beyond her job description for the sake of another?

Any last questions before we depart?

I appreciate your consideration and assistance in conducting this study.

**Prompts for Individual Interviews with Key Informants (as needed)**

1. Elaborate on your experience(s) working with Dr. Mitchell.
2. Elaborate on other attributes of an effective school leader that you believe Dr. Mitchell possesses.
3. Elaborate on how decisions that Dr. Mitchell made helped the overall movement of a school and community.
4. In terms of student achievement, how has Dr. Mitchell developed educational programs to meet the needs of the students?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to share about this topic?

**Appendix H: Post Interview Surroundings Sheet**

**SURROUNDINGS SHEET**

**Date/Time:**

**Site:**

**Surroundings:**

**Attitudes and Comments (Feelings, reactions and attitude of interviewee):**

**What were the main themes that struck you in this contact?**

**Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had prepared for this contact:**

**Anything else that struck you as salient, germane, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?**

## Appendix I: Biographical Data Sheet

### BIOGRAPHICAL DATA SHEET

Full Name:

Phone (Primary):

(Secondary):

Address:

Email:

Birthdate (MM/DD/YY):

Birthplace:

Ethnicity:

Language(s) Spoken:

Mother's Name:

Ethnicity:

Father's Name:

Ethnicity:

Sisters/Brothers (Interviewee's Place in Family):

Marital Status and Date of Marriage:

Spouse's Name:

Children's Names and Birth Years:

Places Lived (and Dates):

Education:

Elementary School:

Middle/Intermediate/Junior High School:

High School (Year of Graduation):

Colleges Attended (Degrees and Years of Graduation):

Work Experiences (and Dates):

Organizations- Member of (Past and Present):

Awards (and Dates):

Hobbies and Interests:

Religion (Optional)- Active/Inactive:

Any Other Pertinent Biographical Information:

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