

5-1-2017

Principal Leader of the Band: A Conversation between Dr. Lorraine Hedtke and Dr. Jay Fiene, Dean, College of Education at California State University, San Bernardino

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Recommended Citation

Hedtke, Lorraine and Fiene, Jay (2017) "Principal Leader of the Band: A Conversation between Dr. Lorraine Hedtke and Dr. Jay Fiene, Dean, College of Education at California State University, San Bernardino," *Wisdom in Education*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/wie/vol7/iss1/4>

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Abstract

This is an interview that took place between Dr. Lorraine Hedtke and Dr. Jay Fiene, Dean of The College of Education at CSUSB, to explore the trajectory of his professional career. What was unearthed were intersecting themes between being a math teacher, a band leader, a professor in higher education and a college dean. All speak to similar values of caring and justice that drive Dr. Fiene to make a difference in communities where he has been involved.

Keywords

biography, math teacher, dean, college of education, educational leadership, bandleader, interview

Author Statement

As a professor of counseling in the College of Education, I am interested in the stories we draw upon to give meaning to our lives. These stories become acts of politics that offer substantive platforms to inform our work, but even more, can become moments of inspiration for others. My hopes in speaking with Dean Fiene were to find the stories that serve this calling for him and for those who might be interested in a career in education.

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Dr. Jay Fiene for his willingness to speak so candidly with me, speaking with heart about his love of education and service.

**Principal Leader of the Band:
A Conversation between Dr. Lorraine Hedtke and
Dr. Jay Fiene**

Last year, I had the chance to sit down with the Dean of our College of Education at California State University San Bernardino, Dr. Jay Fiene, to talk about the professional pathway that led him to his current position. We spoke of some of the professional ethics that inform his work as well as some of the challenges faced along the way and what have been sources of inspiration.

What became clear in the conversation is how the arc of his career has continuity to draw upon as he guides the college into a new era. Whether as a math teacher, a band leader and conductor, a college professor, or a Dean, Dr. Fiene's efforts to form responsive community to support others to become their best possible, has remained a guiding commitment.

What follows is the verbatim, recorded conversation that has been edited for the written word.

Lorraine: Hedtke: What have been the fields of knowledge that you have endeavored to contribute most to during your career thus far?

Jay Fiene: It's been really varied. At the beginning, I really thought I was going to do a lot with math education. And honestly I came to that even through kind of a back door. I started in academia in music. I started actually in engineering pre-law and I absolutely hated it, I was so incredibly bored. My dad in particular, really wanted me to go into engineering pre-law and become a corporate lawyer, so I went to Valparaiso, a good Lutheran college. I was a good Lutheran kid and went to a school ninety minutes from home. My parents could surprise me any weekend they wanted to, and often did. But I hated it. I had done all these AP kinds of courses and I hated it. And so

then I decided, "Ok, what was the thing I enjoyed the most?" I loved being in a marching band and I loved music. So I thought, "Well, let's do music." There weren't any real performance areas at Valpo. It was either church music or music education. I really couldn't see myself as a church organist, because I hate keyboard. And there's really not a call that will pay a livelihood for a church trumpet player. You're not going to eat things regularly just playing...

So I thought the best avenue was music education. So that decision was what ultimately led me to go out of state. And I loved my music curriculum. I mean I absolutely loved what I did! I liked arranging. I liked conducting. I loved working with marching bands, all of that. I took the high school band, that I student taught at, to the world's fair. I mean how do you not get a kick out of that stuff? But, then I got my first teaching job and beginning music was not fun at all.

LORRAINE: So band and beginning music did not match up for you?

JAY: I can't do all the hand motions and whatever that are required for elementary music and I can only listen to beginners for so long. I mean it's just... It's like teaching a person how to read, I don't know how some people do it. You know there's a magic to that that I'm not – my high school band, those kids, they performed exceedingly well. I was in something I didn't want to do [beginning music classes], at a school where I was the 7th music teacher in 7 years.

LORRAINE: Not a good fit.

JAY: Mhm.

LORRAINE: So how did the ship get righted?

JAY: I had two choices. I could either stay working at that school district, or I

could leave. And so I decided to leave and I went back to school and I got my Masters. And you know I got my Masters in music, thinking this is going to get me the big high school band job that I want, because I now have a Masters in music ed. And, lo and behold, I finished in December, so I had that semester to do something. I was substitute teaching and I had been subbing, and most of the time I subbed music. But then one of the school districts asked me, in November I guess, if I would sub for a math teacher. It turned out mostly to be junior high math, so it was general math, pre-algebra and algebra. It ended up being a long-term sub, and I had a great time. I ended up going back to the university to get another teaching certificate. I had 28 credits to take in math and computer science, so I enrolled in them in that semester - I took all 28 semester units at once and I had to get the dean's permission to take that many. Eventually, what changed for me was I figured out I taught math as a music teacher. And what I mean by that is, in a music class, particularly performance, everybody has to sing the same rhythm, everybody has to sing the same notes. Doesn't matter how long it takes you to get there, it's not music until we're all in sync. And quite honestly, that's how I taught math. I didn't care how long it took me, I didn't care how many different applications, analogies, whatever it took the kid to figure out the right notes, we were going to play together.

LORRAINE: Is that a particular value that you held dear about how you taught math?

JAY: Yeah, because I think that turning point for me was quite honestly what really got me thinking about the difference between hope and opportunity. Having come from an affluent suburb of Chicago, I had some incredible opportunities. I went to a high school of almost 5000

students; I went to Europe twice in high school; I performed in the Macy's day parade; I mean we had all these opportunities. And, I found myself teaching in areas of the country, quite honestly by accident at first, and then very clearly by choice, where there were high pregnancy rates, high poverty rates, there were low college-going rates, simply because I wanted some sort of equity of hope. You know, when you travel the world, when you travel this country with open eyes, and you look at how some people are forced to live simply by zip code, simply by race, ethnicity, chance. Early in my teaching career, I became adamant about every child mattered.

LORRAINE: So there's something important about the equity of hope for you, yes?

JAY: Yeah, it's that every kid needs an advocate and in some areas of the country, we have kids who are the product of biological producers and not parents, and it's not even always their choice. I don't think people purposefully produce kids just to produce kids, but there are a lot of people who are in circumstances of cyclical poverty, under-educated, hostility, and so many factors that create this. When we're in schools and we see kids that don't have anybody advocating for them, that spoke to me about this poverty of opportunity. How do you create hope? You know, my experience with humans is that they can almost do anything, as long as they still have hope. You think about people who survived the Holocaust versus those who didn't, think about people who survived being a POW, versus those who didn't. I mean it's whether or not you believe that there is still something positive to yearn for that often pulls us past something difficult.

LORRAINE: Can you give me an example of a time where that was put into practice for you, when you were working with a kid perhaps, that you had an idea

about how you could help them operationalize hope?

JAY: I think there are lots of examples, I mean everything from working in the classroom to changing bureaucracies. For instance, when I became a principal, one of the rules on the books was that a young woman who was pregnant needed to be homeschooled from the time she began showing until a subsequent time, after which the child was born. Now, I passed biology, and so when I passed biology, I understood that there were two people involved, at least. So the first time a young lady came to talk to me about the fact that she was with child, we had a very open conversation and talked about how we could help her.

In the course of the conversation, I discovered that the other person involved was also a student at school. Understanding that the school board's notion behind all of this was to help these young people best prepare for the oncoming birth of a child, I put them both [the mother and the father] on homeschooling. When it turned out he was an athlete, we of course had to change that policy. And I think subsequently letting all of the kids see what's entailed in childhood pregnancy, being willing to push the bureaucracy to talk about abstinence education for the kids in junior high and safe sex conversations and parenting and making young men, all the kids in child development had to wear a sympathy belly. But it was hysterical to watch the young men wear sympathy bellies. You know, we did the safe sex talks, we did a number of those things to get kids to think much more about what those decisions make as potential longer term consequences. But at the same time to institute alternatives [to the policies]. Then again the bureaucracy had to take note that we were 37 miles from a

bowling alley and 62 miles from a movie theater. These are kids.

LORRAINE: Without a lot of choice.

JAY: Without a lot to do. So how about if we open up the school for things on the weekends for things other than basketball games. So let's have movie nights, let's have sock hops instead of always having a formal dance, let's have some things that happen in the community.

LORRAINE: Would you say that one of the strengths in your career, thus far, has been creating communities in the places that you worked?

JAY: I think, two things I'm good at. One is turning around, and I think the other is challenging a process. Sometimes these things create community by chance, because it unlocks and gives people a chance to think differently. I think it also gives people a chance to understand that we can fall forward. That, ok, we aren't going to get everything right the first time, but what if we get it a little more right than we have it right now.

LORRAINE: So when you say turning around, is that part of that process where you take stock of what's happened and what needs to happen?

JAY: Yeah, so if I go back to the hope issue. When I went to Wheaton, Missouri as a principal, when I went there as a teacher, this was a school district that was averaging 8.9 on the ACT. This was a school district where 11% of the population is pregnant. This is a school district where the schools were organized with K-7 sub-contained classrooms [students having one teacher for all topics], and 8-12 grade high school [students changing teachers for topics]. There was no college prep. It was a school district that still had corporal punishment. It was a school district that had fights and suspensions regularly.

In Wheaton, Missouri, a bedroom community near Branson. It had really well-meaning, folks who wanted to do the

right thing, thought they were doing the right things. But they needed somebody to come in and ask difficult questions. So the first thing I questioned was corporal punishment. How was it right, for me, as a person who was the educated leader, to tell a kid that it was wrong to use violence by using violence. What image was I giving the kids? I asked questions about all the ways we were sending kids away from school. Ok, you've missed school so now I'm going to suspend you – what are we doing? So it was really a matter of asking questions about processes, about things that were inherently illogical, because they were the way things had been traditionally been done. I mean looking at our student population and the number of girls that were pregnant in 8th grade, 9th grade. Why? Because they had nowhere to go, their boyfriends had nowhere to go. So I think until you ask those questions, you can't even begin to turn around. What we did was dramatic and it created community. Because now people were thinking about different kinds of solutions, well how could we become a high school, and a junior high, or a middle school, and an elementary? What would be the right configuration? How could we do college prep? How could we have other things for kids to do besides get in trouble?

LORRAINE: These are communities that you asked to engage in questioning the practices as to what's actually effective, or not effective, for education.

JAY: And for people. I mean ultimately in schools, a question of what's magical about a kid putting a tassel from one side of their head to other at commencement? Why do they walk on stage as a child and walk off stage as an adult? You know suddenly we give you all the personal responsibility and authority of adulthood, because you've graduated, or turned eighteen. Those are artificial. We have to help kids. Growing into adulthood is a

growth process, it doesn't happen because you've graduated.

LORRAINE: So then let me ask you a couple of questions about the ethics that inspired this commitment for you. I'm wondering what are the ethics that are embedded in those things that are important to you about being a professional?

JAY: I guess for me, Lorraine, a lot of it has to do with the fact that I was raised by a woman who was taken out of school in the eighth grade, and my father was a guy who went through high school. They did their level best for us all the way along. But I saw how hard it was for them. You know, my siblings being so much older than I am, I think I had a different vantage point than they did. Both because my folks had reached a better place within the middle class and there were less of us to feed and clothe and everything else, than when they had my three siblings, my aunt, my uncle and my grandmother also living with them and dad was just home from WWII. But, my mother will always, always be my first motivation. Because I look at what we have so often done to young women in this country, and in other countries, to make them less-than, simply because they're women. So we feel entitled to give them less opportunity, to educate them less, to value them less.

And I think too, being transgendered and having presented for 48 years of my life as a female, even though I knew I was different all the way along, I didn't have the words for that all the way along. I think twofold - knowing that I was different, and knowing that my difference was not valued, and yet knowing how I presented and it clearly wasn't valued. To go to a job interview, and have somebody tell me that I look great on paper but I have the wrong plumbing, because they were looking for a band man. I've experienced that kind of discrimination personally, but I think for me,

fundamentally it was just having witnessed what my mom went through, how desperately she wanted to be educated all her life and how capable she would have been. As an American, I consider education a property right, and to think that we summarily want to take that away from some people, because of their documented status, because of their gender, is just absolutely un-American and unethical to me.

LORRAINE: There's something that is quite poignant in what you're saying, about what resonates with you about equality and fairness. And perhaps seeing the other side of what can happen and when that doesn't happen, both to your mom as well as to the personal experiences that you had before your transition, they speak dramatically to you about the importance of fairness.

JAY: Yeah, I mean I do really try to be fair. I mean I'm still human and I'm certain I still have made mistakes in my life. But it's really why, whether you're talking about me as dean now, whether we are speaking about what is important in the promotion and tenure process, to be clearly articulated. You know that it's not a checklist, but let's answer "what questions" as opposed to answering "how many" questions. Let's think about how is this person reflecting and growing across their career, and showing that they're on the right trajectory to being a fully-developed professional, or an adult, if you will, an academic adult. It's a path. And that path to me is demonstrated through learning and through a matter of impact. And I think it's very easy to make a reasoned case for that, just as easy as it would be to say that you must publish in this journal, or you must have X number of these, or whatever else. But I think all of those things, for me, are about opening the doors, providing the resources, and then helping people learn through failure.

LORRAINE: Have there been any particular ethical challenges that you have faced as a professional that have been challenging for you?

JAY: [*pause*] Probably. I don't know. It's difficult for me sometimes, Lorraine, twofold. One is I tend towards optimism. So even in lessons learned, even when I've worked for people who were bad examples of leadership, I've taken from those things so much learning about how I don't want to be a principal, how much I don't want to do this, that or the other thing. I still, when I reflect back on it, see it as a positive. Even when I think about transition and how late in life it occurred for me, I put a really positive spin on it, because I'm quite certain that if I'd known I was transgendered early on, maybe I would have been successful in suicide, because I wouldn't have lived up to my father's dream of his son. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to be as successful as a young woman principal if I was a white male principal in that area. I can't second-guess the universe and everything else to figure out why the timelines are what that they are.

LORRAINE: Do you have practices of reflection that you call on or enlist along the way?

JAY: Well, my biggest judge of whether or not it's been a good day, a good week, a good year, is number one. Can I still look myself in the mirror? Can I still say, at the end of the day, I did everything I could for kids, in the best way I knew how? And did I take as many people along with me on the journey as I could? And I'm always looking behind me. And not because I'm worried about what's behind me, I just want to make sure somebody is behind me [as a leader]. I don't want to be just out on a walk.

LORRAINE: Are you still being a band leader?

JAY: I suspect I am in a lot of ways. To me, the tough ethics for me quite frankly

aren't a yes/no. The toughest ethical dilemmas for me are when I have to choose between two goods. When I have figure out what's more right than right, those are the ethical dilemmas for me. It's not difficult...

LORRAINE: When it's clear cut.

JAY: Right. If somebody is being unjustly treated, if there's something that's unfair, those are easy decisions for me. You know it's just there. But when I have two things that are competing from equally good perspectives and I can't do them both, that's the challenge.

LORRAINE: Sure enough. So let me wrap this around, because I'm kind of curious about some of the things you are saying and how it fits into your career at Cal State. I'm particularly interested in what has spoken to you in the earlier part of your career, how do I serve underserved communities and how do I create communities out of fractured communities. And I'm wondering about how that fits in your career here at Cal State?

JAY: You know I can honestly say I'm glad I wasn't driving my life, because it's been this amazing progression. I went from a music job in a year that wasn't particularly wonderful, and stumbled into teaching math that led to being a high school principal that led to an amazing opportunity with an Eisenhower grant for young women in math and science, that led to somebody asking me to do my doctorate. In the intervening, somebody decided I should apply for a principalship and encouraged me to do that. And you know, then I go to the University of Missouri and I think I'm going to major in math education, and it turns out that I really needed to do educational leadership, so what was a minor turned into a major. I ended up doing math and math education as my support areas and writing a dissertation on chaos theory. But in all of those places, God, the universe,

whatever you want to call it, has put people in those places, to serve as both a guide and a prod. And it's always been that they could convince me that I needed to do this, because, if I did this, I could have a greater impact on more kids. And so I went from being a teacher to being a principal, because they wouldn't just be the kids in my classroom, I'd have all the kids in the school. I went to teaching people to be principals, because I wouldn't just be a principal at one school, I'd be a principal at a whole bunch of schools. I worked on grants and contracts that again worked with a larger set of groups of principals and superintendents and state agencies. I wrote the doctoral program at Western Kentucky, because again I could create something slightly different and have a greater impact on more.

LORRAINE: So they became bigger bands.

JAY: Yeah and I came here, honestly, I really came to Cal State for a personal reason. For me it was about focusing on the transition, because when I came out here, I interviewed pre-surgery and arrived post-surgery. I really looked at coming to Cal State and being a department chair as a step back to a kinder, simpler job. And then suddenly, ten months later, I found myself stepping forward as an interim leader. Because again we had an organization that had gotten itself into a place for a lot of reasons, not any one person or any one thing, but over time had gotten itself into a place where it needed to turn again. We had a budget deficit, we had some interpersonal toxicities, and we weren't well associated with the community.

LORRAINE: So did that call upon skills on how you're able to do that turn about?

JAY: It's really hard to sit in the department chair in educational leadership, and see that we need leadership, at least some kind of

difference in leadership, and nobody's stepping up. So when people start prodding, I go okay well I guess I'll think about the interim but I don't really want to do this. And so I really came in as a temporary. I really did not move to California with the intention of being a dean. I didn't even come into being interim dean with a plan to be dean.

LORRAINE: There's something that ... the tasks that you were called upon to do, fit with the trajectory of some professional skills.

JAY: Yeah. And it was just simply, I didn't want to see this college be served by other colleges. I couldn't fathom how in the CSU, with one of the primary missions of the CSU being educator preparation, we wouldn't have a college. Especially when we're the only CSU for a pretty good distance. I mean we have a huge service region. So what message do we send to the kids of the communities, when we don't have a college of education?

LORRAINE: So if you wanted to give a message to say, some kids who are thinking about a career in teaching or a career in educational administration, what kinds of advice from your own career would you say prepared you for this.

JAY: Well I think the first question they have to ask themselves is do they really like young people? You have to like them enough, even when there are challenges. You have to like young people sometimes more than they like themselves, because too often they don't even know why they're behaving the way they're behaving, because nobody's ever given them enough structure to know better. I think second is if you are not an eternal optimist, and can't see the power of untapped potential, it's going to wear you out, because I've never spent a day worrying that I won't have enough work to do. But I do worry a lot about whether I bring enough

energy, enough intelligence, enough compassion, to what I do.

LORRAINE: Yes, that's fair enough. So in your work here at Cal State, what stands out for you about the role that you have played both in teaching and as an administrator?

JAY: Well I haven't gotten to teach much. The only thing I've really got to do was a couple of doctoral courses, just because of the challenge of being an MPP (this acronym stands for "Management Personnel Plan" and refers to management positions in the California State University system) and taking away work from the union members. But I hope I teach everyday to faculty/staff/students through the example that I set. I hope people learn from the work ethic, I hope people learn from the things that matter to me, that being, family first, integrity, being willing to be transparent, and being willing to admit mistakes. But in terms of my service in administration, I think I'm thrilled to be helping dust off some of the challenges and bring the bright shine back to this college. I mean it thrills me to go out and hear school administrators – whether they're principals, or HR directors, or superintendents, or whatever – constantly asking, "How can we get more of your students? How do we hire more of your counselors? How do we hire more of your folks?" I love hearing how students are better prepared than the practitioners that are in service sometimes around common core, around avid, around counseling theories, next generation science standards, whatever it might be. It's a delight to hear that our kids are walking out of here with a strong foundation in what we're doing to make those first years, or whichever of those pathways, a little bit easier. Because the first year of teaching, the first year of counseling, the first year of administering, those are challenging. So if we're doing

something to make that a little bit more palatable, hallelujah. You know I love what we've done with the 50th [anniversary] and being able to get international discourse going again. Take your pick. I love the fact that people think differently of us on the university campus than they did. I mean we're at the cusp of campus looking at us to lead the way in a lot of things – as we move from quarter to semester, as we think about shifting pedagogies – you know, that's huge. I mean to have been able to put some remnants of a score out there and then have people to make the music, if you want to use that metaphor. To me, I just happened to have picked some of the right songs, and we're nailing them. And I just get the pleasure of being there. On a couple of occasions, I've had a chance to conduct really, really skilled musicians. And I really feel like we're getting to a place in the college where we've shifted discourse patterns with people, where nobody after the re-organization is in the same discourse patterns, but programs and disciplines are together and people are looking at new and different integrations and interdisciplinary work. I just think we're on the cusp of some really amazing things.

LORRAINE: So let me just say that, being quite familiar with band myself, and what it takes for a really good band to march well and perform in unison, that you're speaking about it in a way that makes it sound as if it's almost effortless. Also, being somewhat familiar with bands, I happen to know that being a band leader is quite the contrary. They make it appear effortless, but it requires an awful lot of sweat and tears, right? So I'm imagining that over the last few years as we've shifted through the reorganization process at the College of Education, that you've got a few pounds of your sweat and tears and energy in there.

JAY: Yeah, I think I've worked as hard as I know how to work on behalf of us, but I don't for a minute think I did this – we did this. I asked some tough questions; I've challenged some processes; and, I've tried to be a role model. But I've tried to encourage people's hearts by consistently letting people know that I care about them and I notice what they're doing. I've worked really hard to enable folks to have the resources that they need – whether the time or something else. I'm not always good at praise but I'm probably worst at praise for myself. But I do think, I think I've inspired a shared vision for the college. And I think I have challenged a heck of a lot of processes as we had one president leave and a new one come on board, a new academic leadership change.

LORRAINE: Yes, and a new provost.

JAY: But you think about the number of philanthropic resources we have now versus what we've had before, it's quite different, except when we were actually building this great new building. The relationships we have with schools and agencies within the community too.

LORRAINE: Is this the same Jay? Similar to the schools that you've worked with in the first part of your career, that you came and you worked with a community that was fractured both internally and in terms of the links externally, and that part of your success has been to reconnect those configurations, both externally and internally.

JAY: Yeah I think for all intents and purposes, Lorraine, I think I'm a school principal. And I think I'm a community school principal. And when I don't see the school serving the community, and when I don't see the community in the school, I'm worried. So in that regard, I probably am a community builder. I firmly believe in the power of a local community school. I mean I think that old metaphor of the school being the

community hub makes perfect sense and I wish more schools were one-stop centers for the whole human.

LORRAINE: Same, same.

JAY: And I honestly think as a dean of a college of anything, you are a school principal. You have a very diverse faculty, you have students, you have staff, you have a community that you're serving. You're not the superintendent, you report to somebody else. And for whatever reason, I firmly believe I was put on the earth to be a principal. I was a good principal at a high school and I think I've been a pretty good principal here. I will do the same thing here that I did there. When I feel like it's stable enough, then I'll go to my last phase. And my last phase is going to be really writing and doing things on behalf of transgender policy.

LORRAINE: Yeah, I was just going to ask would you like to do research and what would you like to write about in the next part of your career.

JAY: I really firmly believe we can do transgender policy and practice better than we did special education. I really think that we can do this, without all the legislation and litigation that has been required since 1965 to move the special education dial or the mental health dial or various diverse population dials, any of those. And so what I want to do is, once I feel like we're there as a community, whether that's three years from now or five years from now, I want to spend the latter part of my career, the last few years, really teaching and doing trans policy stuff.

LORRAINE: Nice. I would love that. Alright, so I have hit you with a barrage of questions.

JAY: Have I bored you to death?

LORRAINE: Not at all, actually. It's been really a lovely time, because we don't take this time. So it's really nice to hear all these things.