

Leadership for Lasting Impact: The PRAE Framework for Values Alignment and Educator Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Educational leaders, whether formally designated through organizational hierarchies or informally recognized through peer influence, have the unique opportunity to enhance the cognitive and emotional well-being of their communities by focusing on values alignment. Professional Reciprocal Altruism in Education (PRAE) is a grounded theory offering educational leaders a practical and compelling framework for integrating values alignment into the professional practices of the faculty they serve. This framework empowers educators across all levels and specialties to cultivate a supportive, inclusive community that values individuals holistically. By leveraging altruism—the predominant motivator for entering the teaching profession—as a shared value, PRAE fosters authentic engagement within the Community of Practice (CoP) among educators. Guiding faculty and related educational professionals through the process of aligning personal values, attitudes, and cultural constructs with those of the CoP enables the integration of the authentic self with the professional identity. This alignment, in turn, strengthens intrinsic motivation and supports ongoing personal and professional growth, benefiting students, communities, the teaching profession, and the educators themselves.

1. Introduction

Across global education systems, teachers are leaving the profession at unprecedented rates. While structural issues such as low pay, limited support, and high accountability pressures are often cited, a deeper and more human dissonance underlies these patterns: the misalignment between educators' personal values and the institutional cultures in which they work. This lack of value congruence—defined as the psychological discord experienced when one's core beliefs are disconnected from one's professional reality—has been increasingly recognized as a powerful predictor of burnout, disengagement, and attrition (Wang & Hall, 2019; Bao et al., 2012; Van Beurden et al., 2017).

Amid this disillusionment, leaders face an urgent challenge: how to re-engage educators in meaningful, sustainable ways without adding to their already onerous workloads them or resorting to short-term interventions. *Professional Reciprocal Altruism in Education* (PRAE) responds to this challenge with a grounded, values-based framework. Developed through a

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constructivist research approach centered on teacher voice and lived experience, PRAE invites both individual and institutional realignment. For educational leaders, it offers not just a model of teacher support, but a strategic paradigm for long-term cultural transformation.

The conceptual underpinnings of PRAE draw from multiple intersecting traditions. First, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) serves as a foundation for understanding educator motivation as a progression toward self-actualization—a state made possible only when psychological safety, belonging, and purpose are met. These insights are further supported by self-determination theory, which posits that intrinsic motivation arises when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Glasser's Choice Theory (1998) complements this view by emphasizing that individual behavior is driven by the desire to satisfy five core needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. In both models, fulfilment is closely tied to autonomy and values alignment.

Equally central is the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), whose notion of "legitimate peripheral participation" within communities of practice affirms that professional identity is developed through ongoing engagement, mutual recognition, and meaningful contribution. PRAE synthesizes these perspectives to correlate that educator vitality depends on the degree to which individuals feel connected to their profession through shared values, authentic participation, and personal meaning.

2. Methodology and Development of the PRAE Framework

PRAE emerged through grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), following an interpretive, constructivist tradition that privileges the narratives and meaning-making of those experiencing the phenomena under study. This approach aligns with calls for education research to center teacher identity, reflective practice, and lived experience as legitimate data sources (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data were drawn from three primary sources:

- (1) Qualitative interviews with practicing educators across diverse contexts,
- (2) Reflective journaling and group discussions within professional development sessions, and
- (3) Observations and field notes taken during values-based workshops led by the authors.

Through iterative coding and thematic analysis, a recurring motif emerged: educators were sustained not by policy mandates or external recognition, but by a deeply internalized drive to serve others—what participants often described as "the reason I came into teaching." This intrinsic motivator aligned closely with the concept of altruism, and more specifically, reciprocal altruism—the understanding that service offered within a community often yields collective, if not immediate, benefit (Levi, 2017; Trivers, 1971). Out of these themes, PRAE was conceptualized as a framework for understanding, operationalizing, and re-engaging that original altruistic impulse within a professional context.

To bridge theory with practice, the PRAE Values Assessment was developed as a companion tool. Drawing from qualitative data, a series of reflective statements were drafted and categorized into six dominant value groupings aligned with PRAE's core pillars: altruism, service, compassion, empathy, reciprocal altruism, and community. These groupings were tested through practitioner-facing workshops, with feedback used to refine both the language and the flow of the tool. The final version was designed not as a diagnostic instrument but as a reflective entry point, enabling educators to identify their core motivators and engage in values dialogue with colleagues in Community of Practice (CoP) structures.

3. Results: The PRAE Assessment Tool in Practice

The PRAE Values Assessment invites educators to respond to value-based statements, each of which has been mapped to an affective domain reflective of one of the six PRAE pillars. Participants are grouped based on dominant responses and explore shared value orientations in small groups. The reflective dialogue that follows enables educators to surface the tensions between their values and professional practice, while fostering collective affirmation and renewed commitment.

This process is scaffolded by six cyclical phases: **Recognition, Reflection, Reframing, Revisiting, Refreshing, and Replenishing**. These pillars mirror adult learning theory in their recursive structure and align closely with Deweyan models of experiential reflection (Dewey, 1916; Knowles et al., 2015). When implemented within school settings—whether through team meetings, coaching cycles, or full-staff Professional Development (PD) days—the PRAE framework becomes a replicable and accessible method for sustaining staff wellness and shared purpose.

4. Discussion: Leadership as the Catalyst for Values Alignment

Although PRAE centers around the lived experience of educators, it is inherently a leadership tool. Leaders serve as stewards of professional culture, and PRAE requires their intentional engagement to thrive. This begins with leaders modeling their own reflective practices and continues with their commitment to embedding values-based conversation into the fabric of professional life.

From a strategic standpoint, PRAE addresses a number of institutional pain points. High turnover remains a costly challenge; replacing a single teacher is estimated to cost districts between \$10,000 and \$21,000 when accounting for recruitment, onboarding, and lost instructional time (US DOE, 2024). Beyond cost, turnover erodes school climate and disrupts student learning. By contrast, value-aligned educators are more likely to experience professional fulfilment, resist burnout, and remain committed to their schools long-term (Overdeck Foundation, 2023).

Importantly, PRAE does not replace existing leadership initiatives—it enhances them. When embedded within coaching frameworks, induction programs, or strategic planning cycles, PRAE serves as a mechanism for bringing clarity and cohesion to amorphous, qualitative focused concepts. It reminds leaders and teachers alike that the work of education is not just about standards or performance, but about meaning, identity, and purpose.

5. Conclusions: Toward Lasting Impact

In a time when many educators are struggling to stay connected to their work, PRAE offers a pathway back to purpose. It affirms that the core values that drew teachers into the profession—empathy, service, community—are not liabilities, but the very qualities that make their work sustainable. For educational leaders, PRAE is both a philosophical commitment and a practical strategy. It provides tools to realign culture, support staff wellness, and invest in human capital in ways that are emotionally resonant, intellectually grounded, and fiscally wise.

As one educator reflected during a 2024 workshop, “*I didn’t realise how much I had lost touch with what brought me here. PRAE helped me name it—and begin to claim it again.*” These words capture PRAE’s enduring promise: to reconnect the personal and the professional, and to support leadership that nurtures not just teacher retention, but teacher flourishing.

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