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# A vision of elementary school leadership : a reflective research paper

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# A vision of elementary school leadership : a reflective research paper

## **Abstract**

I want to help children feel that sense of belonging, self-worth, and pride that comes from learning. My task as an administrator will be to put the necessary pieces in place to make sure that happens. One strand woven throughout all my experiences is the importance of building and sustaining relationships.

Two key beliefs I will discuss in the following pages include: 1. The keys to helping our students find success is in the effectiveness of our teachers. 2. An administrator is responsible for creating a nurturing school environment, which enables him/her to lead students, families and staff toward a shared sense of purpose.

A VISION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

A Reflective Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Education Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary

Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for

the Degree Masters of Arts Education

By

Dawn Embretson

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This Research Paper by: Dawn R. Embretson

Entitled: A VISION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:  
A REFLECTIVE RESEARCH PAPER

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of  
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Growing up in a small eastern Iowa town, my family gave me a firm foundation of faith, instilled in me a solid work ethic, and a belief that the key to being successful in anything you do is based on relationships. I have been given many wonderful opportunities thus far in my life! These opportunities have given me experiences that fuel my desire to step into a leadership role in education.

My elementary and junior high school years were spent in a parochial school where I never had more than 20 students in my class, and actually got to have the same teacher for four years. Each day started with a lesson from scripture and an explanation of its application to our everyday lives. Because we were together year after year, I was able to build lasting relationships with my peers and teachers. The families knew each other well and the teachers knew the families well.

Our family owned the town grocery store. On a daily basis my parents modeled for me what it meant to work hard. This lesson also came on the countless trips up north to visit my uncle's dairy farm. One of my favorite things to do (to this day!) is to bale hay. I haven't found many other activities as energizing and instantly rewarding as working from sun-up to sundown and then falling into bed completely exhausted from the day's work. I get a sense of "home" each time I attend the church I grew up in and I believe there is a part of me filled with the many characters I had the pleasure of knowing while growing up in the grocery store.

I share my upbringing, because it continually influences my life as I grow as an educator. Any job I have had in the field of education has been met with the same “hard work pays off” attitude. This attitude helps me to persevere in any task I tackle. Why then have I chosen to take a role of leadership in education? I want to help children feel that sense of belonging, self-worth, and pride that comes from learning. My task as an administrator will be to put the necessary pieces in place to make sure that happens.

One strand woven throughout all my experiences is the importance of building and sustaining relationships. My experiences thus far have helped me shape many of the beliefs I have about education. Two key beliefs I will discuss in the following pages include:

1. The keys to helping our students find success is in the effectiveness of our teachers.
2. An administrator is responsible for creating a nurturing school environment, which enables him/her to lead students, families and staff toward a shared sense of purpose.

### Developing Effective Teachers

Peyton Williams, Jr. the 2002-2003 President of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, states “In order to continue improving how we teach we must pay attention to the relationship between the science of teaching and the art of teaching” (Williams, 2003, p.7). Effective teaching occurs

when a teacher is anchored in pedagogy combined with the ability to incorporate imagination, creativity and inspiration into the teaching and learning process for our students.

As the leader of an educational community one of my responsibilities is to put strategies in place that allow staff to grow as educators. Part of the growth will occur in the form of empowering teachers to share responsibility for what goes on in our schools. Author Todd Whitaker (2003) asserts “As leaders we must help our teachers take responsibility for their performance in the classroom. This empowering approach raises the level of their efficacy and will eventually be passed on to students” (p. 19).

In the books I’ve read, by Whitaker (2003), concerning leadership in education, he continually emphasizes that a school is about its people. Many times the administrator will get most of the credit when a school has been successful, when actually the majority of that praise needs to be given to the teachers who are working with student’s day in and day out.

Alfie Kohn (1999) states, “If we want to talk about schools in a way that matters, we have to talk about people in schools. In fact, we have to make a habit of seeing things from the perspective of that child sitting right over there” (p. 25). The first half of Kohn’s statement echoes what my mentor has told me time and time again – the key to having an effective school is hiring good people. Letting good staff members lead allows us to create environments that children need to

learn. Educators, as well as students, need to feel safe, respected and comfortably challenged. In a review of the literature since 1985, Kathleen Cotton (2003), found that, “Principals in high-achieving schools create safe and orderly environments where students feel a sense of responsibility for their learning. Principals are highly visible, visiting classrooms frequently so that they both know what is going on” (p. 27).

Whitaker (2003) shares key ideas for working with staff in his book What Great Principals Do Differently. He suggests two ways to improve our schools are to get better teachers and improve the teachers you have. Effective principals focus on the people in their schools. They see programs as solutions only when the programs bring out the best in people. Good teachers know the key element to success that they can control is their own performance, so they are constantly striving to improve.

The key to developing effective teachers is in productive staff development. Robert J. Marzano (2003) suggests you (a) take the pulse of your staff, (b) identify and implement an intervention, (c) examine the effect on achievement, and (d) move to the next issue. As we put these steps into place they will serve as a solid base on which we can build sound decision making practices that reflect data-driven leadership. Staff development that is timely and purposeful will give educators the tools they need to meet the ever-changing needs of our students.



Losing touch with effective classroom practice is one of the concerns I have as I work toward becoming a leader in education. In my current position, being highly visible in classrooms helps me to stay in touch.

If adults don't learn, students won't either. We do know that if we keep doing things the way we always have, we'll keep getting the same results. The trick is not to do more, but to rethink how and why you're doing what you are doing. And to keep a simple concept in mind:

Everything a principal does in a school should be focused on ensuring the learning of both students and adults. (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001, p.5)

Being actively involved in classrooms and engaging in conversations with teachers about teaching is one strategy that will help me to stay up to date with current classroom practices. This will also help staff to have a clear understanding of how I expect them to interact with students.

Schools need leadership that focuses on advancing student learning as well as staff learning. "A culture of professional inquiry that presumes high-level teaching skills and is embedded in an ethos of sharing will energize teachers to learn new techniques" (Danielson, 2002, p. 63). Whitaker (2003) sees an opening on the staff as a principal's single most precious commodity. This is a shift in thinking for me.

I've been accustomed to feeling a sense of loss when a staff member moves on and then experiencing feelings of uncertainty as we bring a new person on board. A new staff member is an opportunity to breathe new life into a school. A new staff member may challenge all of us to a new way of thinking that will help us be more effective with our students,

I am a life-long learner and I am continually looking for new ways to meet the needs of students. I seek out learning opportunities, whether it be through study groups, attending workshops, taking classes, or job shadowing. I will encourage staff to do the same.

When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school, when all the school's educators examine the efforts and initiatives of the school through the lens of their impact on learning, the structure and culture of the school begin to change in substantive ways. Educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leader with a focus on teaching to the leader of a professional community with a focus on learning. (DuFour, 2002, p. 13)

Professional development needs to happen as a staff, not as several different entities. We need to effectively use the knowledge, information, and skills of individual staff members to develop best practices for our students. My job will be to tap into the wealth of resources that are already on staff. As an

administrator I will help staff to model life-long learning through staff evaluation that is proactive, goal oriented and useful. I will make sure teachers understand the rationale behind curriculum decisions that are made and are given strategies to effectively use the data they collect to create a productive learning environment.

“Great principals hire dynamic teachers and strive to keep them that way” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 44). Many times in our effort to create a learning environment for students we overlook the needs of our staff. Each person on staff, from the part-time substitute in the kitchen through the administrator, is a valued part of the learning community. In an effective school, each of these stakeholders understands his or her role in helping to create a community where each child feels safe, wanted, cared for and challenged.

### Creating a Nurturing Learning Environment

The environment in which schools operate is created on behalf of the students and their families. The school is here for them. They are our clients! A productive learning environment is warm and friendly, growing, respectful and alive! “The principal who sets a positive tone can influence the interactions of everyone in the school” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 25).

Effective leaders enable others to act, model the behaviors they expect and encourage from the heart. By modeling my values, beliefs, and attitudes with care, I can inspire others to do the same. I am a role model - everyday in every way! Because I accept responsibility for the school and what goes on inside it I need to

understand what goes on everyday. It is impossible for a person to know every little detail of what goes on in each and every classroom. However, by keeping the lines of communication open a mutually respectful, trusting environment is created. Staff, students, and parents need to feel they are treated fairly, equitably, with dignity and with respect. A professional environment that is respectful will be productive so that we can provide the most effective instruction for our learners.

### *Guiding principles*

In my experiences thus far I've been exposed to and have experienced many different forms of instruction and leadership that have developed and nurtured the entire person and created a productive learning environment. As I strive to create a productive learning environment I will rely on two schools of thought, (a) the use of lifelong guidelines, outlined in Integrated Thematic Instruction (Kovalik & Olsen, 2001) and (b) the processes of TRIBES<sup>TLC</sup>® (Gibbs, 2000). Kovalik and Olsen's work shares the impact that a nurturing learning environment has on student achievement. Each and every year scientists are finding more and more information on the brain and how it learns. This is powerful information for educators! Understanding how the brain typically learns helps us to put strategies in place that will help our students to be successful. The other resource I will rely on to establish a nurturing environment, are the processes described by Jeanne Gibbs. The "tribes trail" has three stages that

include inclusion, influence and the community. “The success of any group’s life together and the individual achievements its members can make depend upon the teacher-facilitator’s knowledge and ability to orchestrate activities appropriate to the group’s particular stage of development” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 76).

The stage of inclusion is the opportunity for people in a group to learn about one another. Activities are designed to help people introduce themselves, express hopes and expectations for the group, and to be acknowledged. As groups learn more about one another they will gradually move on to the stage of influence. During the phase of influence the group becomes restless, which is a good sign. It means that people do feel included and are ready to work together. Group members begin to express diverse attitudes, opinions, and personal feelings. They put forth ideas without passing judgment and begin to use shared decision-making.

The final stage of the trail is the stage of community. Community evolves when many minds and hearts come together to work toward common goals. A caring community doesn’t just happen. It needs to be intentionally developed. Effective leadership creates an environment where each stakeholder feels they are a part of the school community and aware of the role they play. I will model these strategies for staff during staff meetings, staff development activities, etc. I will encourage them to use the strategies in their classroom as well.

### *Building relationships with staff*

As I mentioned earlier I will model strategies and encourage staff to use many of the ideas from Jeanne Gibbs' (2000) TRIBES<sup>TLC</sup>®. Tribes is not a curriculum, a program or a list of activities. It is a process. "A 'process' is a sequence of events that lead to the achievement of an outcome. The outcome of the Tribes process is to develop a positive environment that promotes human growth and learning" (Gibbs, 2000, p. 21).

Author Sharon O'Connor in her article "Charge up your faculty with a retreat" (*Today's School Shared Leadership in Education*, 2003, p. 25) suggests holding a faculty retreat before the first day of classes. The purpose is to energize and unify teachers and staff. By gathering off-site for a day of team building, preparation and inspiration, the school staff will gain perspective and develop a sense of purpose that will set the tone for the coming year. "Principals who consistently model their expectations for how people should be treated give their schools a valuable gift – a gift that, in time, everyone in the school can give to each other" (Whitaker, 2003, p. 26). Effective principals know that a positive change in schools is up to them. Whitaker also shares that success in any profession starts with a focus on self. After all, we are the one variable that we can most easily and most productively influence.

One goal I have of a retreat is to develop a collective commitment to what we believe and seek to create for our students, to create a vision for our school. I

will put in place the structures needed to create a professional learning community.

### *School improvement plan*

Regular visits, planned and unplanned, will help me to stay on top of the day-to-day needs of the school. A visionary school leader ensures that the school community is involved in improvement efforts, educational programs, plans, and actions that tie into the vision of the school. Victoria L. Bernhardt (1999) notes that school improvement is about the school becoming an effective learning environment. This begins with the school improvement plan. A well-defined school improvement plan begins with a school-wide, strategic plan that provides a logical framework for achieving a school vision. A comprehensive school improvement plan includes assessment, a mission statement, a vision made up of values and beliefs, long-range goals, an action plan, and an estimation of budget needs. Because shared visions emerge from personal visions, they produce energy and foster commitment. “It can be said that nothing happens until there is vision. But it’s equally true that a vision with no underlying sense of purpose, no calling, is just a good idea – all ‘sound and fury, signifying nothing’” (Senge, 1990, p. 149). Senge encourages people to develop a personal vision first, for without a personal vision all you can do is to follow someone else’s. A clearly stated shared vision that all can understand and commit to is one of the most important elements of a quality school plan. It helps us determine where we are going.

Professional development is then tied directly to the vision and goals, which allow us to encourage and model life-long learning.

### *Building a professional learning community*

Richard and Rebecca DuFour (2002) note that professional learning communities are action-oriented and have the ability to turn the vision of a school into a reality. A common vision guides the decisions that are made and the directions that are taken. "The leader's role in a professional learning community is to promote, protect, and defend the schools vision and values and to confront behavior that is inconsistent with the schools vision and values" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 27). The heart and soul of a professional learning community is the work of its collaborative teams that share a common purpose. The professional learning community incorporates developing effective teachers and directly affects the school's culture.

The work of the professional learning community is driven by the comprehensive school improvement plan (CSIP). The school improvement plan incorporates the mission and vision of the building. It is written in common language and becomes a living, breathing document. Because the stakeholders create it, it can be walked and talked everyday and used to make short term, as well as long range plans. An effective visionary leader creates opportunities for staff and students to visit the mission statement often. An effective visionary leader is continually asking "where are we now?" in regards to our vision and



better yet “how are we going to get there?” Staff, parents and community members understand how curriculum and teaching methods help us realize our vision. Data is collected often and used to guide curriculum decisions and instructional practices that help to meet the needs of every learner. It is important to provide services to learners that are designed to meet their individual and unique learning styles, instead of expecting one method to work for every child.

### *Instructional Leadership*

I believe instructional leadership includes creating multiple learning opportunities for students and staff, continually evaluating the programs that are in place, and finding solutions for areas of improvement. As a learning community we can assess the school culture and climate to determine areas of need through on-going action research teams. Action research teams will help us to determine effective instructional strategies. Effective instructional decisions cannot be based solely on one assessment. Multiple assessments give you a true picture of student abilities. Once a true picture is established we can design and implement strategies that will make an impact on the child’s learning. When effective strategies are determined teachers need consistent time to plan and to develop effective instructional practices.

As an instructional leader, I can make sure that teachers are given opportunities to plan together and build on one another’s strengths. “When teachers plan instruction together, they take account of the curriculum and

assessment, structure the schedule and instructional groups, and deploy the teachers to ensure that all students are successful” (Danielson, 2002, p. 93). By sharing strategies, teachers help to promote a culture of professional inquiry in the schools and forge a common purpose among team members as they cultivate and refine their approaches to instruction.

As a group of professional learners we will routinely identify barriers for student learning. Once they are identified they can be clarified and then addressed. Effective schools make curriculum decisions that are based on research and expertise of teachers. An educator’s knowledge of learning, teaching and student development has a direct impact on decisions that are made in effective schools. Stakeholders are involved in decisions affecting the school so that responsibility is shared to maximize ownership and accountability.

### *Building relationships with students*

In her book A Framework for Understanding Poverty author Ruby Payne (1998) stresses the importance of building strong relationships with students. Many students who are living in poverty have a value system that places high priority on entertainment and on relationships. This is often in conflict with the values of an educator. Prior to reading Payne’s work I was often frustrated when a child, who wore shoes with holes and the same clothing everyday for a week, had gotten the latest video game to play on their home’s big screen television, while the family couldn’t afford the two dollars that were needed for their child to

attend a field trip. Understanding that value is placed on entertainment helped me to understand where the parent and child were coming from.

In the school setting we can focus on building relationships that create an inviting learning environment for all our students. Because an effective principal is highly visible in the classroom, and engaged in conversations with students about what they are learning, students understand the principal is concerned about their learning. This sends the message to students that they too are responsible for their learning.

For one of the classes, in the Educational Leadership program, we were asked to report on a structure that was in place in schools today that was helping students be successful. I chose to investigate the concept of multi-age classrooms. Students and staff in multi-age classrooms often develop a sense of “family” with the class. Sandra J. Stone (1996) states, “In a multi-age community, every child in the ‘family’ can become a learner *on his own continuum of growth*. The multi-age classroom supports his individual growth through a *process* approach to learning that is child centered rather than curriculum centered” (p vii). These particular structures model real-world situations where students are developing social skills they will be able to use in our multi-age society. The multi-age structure forces educators to use best practices which include: (a) curriculum and instruction that is age appropriate, (b) an integrated curriculum that allows students to make connections to their current knowledge base, (c) approaches which educate the

whole child, (d) knowledge of child development to create learning challenges children can successfully handle, and (e) teachers working collaboratively to meet the needs of their students. “Learning goals for children can be described in Best Practice terms – progressive, developmentally appropriate, research-based, and eminently teachable” (Daniels, Hyde, & Zemelman, 1998, p. 6).

With a multi-age approach, educators structure learning experiences that allow them to fit the schools to the children rather than fit the children to the school. The longer that I’m in education the more I learn about efficiently using the multitude of resources that we have available to us to help students. The reality is that the school has more responsibility than ever for the children who are walking through its doors. For some of our students school is the best place they can be.

#### *Effects of the environment on students and staff*

As I look back at some of the experiences I’ve had, I realize more and more the impact one teacher can have on an entire staff. While it appears to be easier to “see” when a staff member has a negative attitude, I think someone with a positive attitude can breathe new life into a school. I have worked with educators who were not happy with their jobs and as the administration gradually replaced one or two staff members with a negative attitude, the entire atmosphere of the building changed. “The most significant way to rapidly improve a school is to add teachers who are better than the ones who leave” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 43).

An administrator who ensures that teachers have the tools they need to create healthy learning environments will directly influence what is happening in the classroom setting. This starts with good relationships. An organized leader is aware of current research regarding learning, effective teaching practices and student development, and has structures in place to disperse this information to staff. The school day is structured to maximize student and staff time for learning and instruction in a safe, friendly, and warm environment.

Jensen (1998) describes how the environment affects the brain. "A part of the Hippocratic Oath says that the first rule in medicine is to do patients no harm. That may well apply to educators, too. Excess stress and threat in the school environment may be the single greatest contributor to impaired academic learning" (p. 52). One of the best ways to impact our student's success is to eliminate negatives and remove threats from the learning environment, such as embarrassment, finger-pointing, unrealistic deadlines, after school detention, humiliation, sarcasm or being bullied. Once the threats are gone we can go to work on enriching the environment. As the leader of a learning community I will help staff, parents and community members understand that each of us plays a significant role in creating a nourishing learning environment for our students.

### Conclusion

I've been given many opportunities to observe and experience quality leadership that has helped to shape my values and beliefs regarding education. I

don't view these values and beliefs as clear-cut, rigid standards but rather as guidelines for an ongoing journey that will have highs, lows, and cover many paths. This paper is intended to be an organized collection of thoughts that I believe will help me to be an effective leader in the field of education. I believe two key aspects of providing success for our students include developing effective teachers and creating nurturing learning environments. These two aspects of leadership are but "the tip of the iceberg," as there is no way to succinctly describe every aspect of the complex job of school administrator. I will strive to be a leader who empowers her staff to be leaders themselves.

I often think of a principal's role being similar to that of an orchestra director. Many days the job seems to be about making sure that each person has the skills and tools necessary to effectively "play" his or her part. To create our "masterpiece" we need to make sure everyone is on the same page and playing their notes at exactly the right moment. One of my favorite things about being an educator is that each and every day is different. I head into each school day with a sense of adventure because you never know where a child, a parent, or a staff member might lead you. I'm excited to share my knowledge and experience with others as I head into the field of administration. I also look forward to the new adventures and challenges that the next century will bring in the field of education.

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