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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

Administration is a word cluttered with connotative and denotative thoughts for each individual. When attached to the word education, it brings on another layer of detail and philosophical purpose. Obviously those of us involved in education have laid down the first belief that is essential to our jobs. That being the desire and the motivation to mold and educate our nation's youth. We believe we will make a difference in children's lives. An important and positive impact toward the education of our youth should and will remain the focus for administrators, for without children, we would have no purpose. However, that in and of itself is not enough for the administrator. He or she has a desire and demand to do more and be more. Those roles and beliefs are the object of this narrative.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

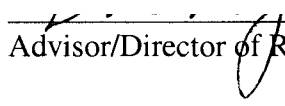
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Kathleen J. Gavin
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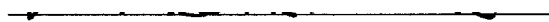
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Administration is a word cluttered with connotative and denotative thoughts for each individual. When attached to the word education, it brings on another layer of detail and philosophical purpose. Obviously those of us involved in education have laid down the first belief that is essential to our jobs. That being the desire and the motivation to mold and educate our nation's youth. We believe we will make a difference in children's lives. An important and positive impact toward the education of our youth should and will remain the focus for administrators, for without children, we would have no purpose. However, that in and of itself is not enough for the administrator. He or she has a desire and demand to do more and be more. Those roles and beliefs are the object of this narrative.

Values and Beliefs

Role with Children

The first role, and one of the most important, is our role with children. How can we best help them in the education arena? Two direct impacts that administrators make are the impact on what is taught, and how it is taught (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde 1998). We impact what is taught by being an integral part of the curriculum decision process. It can only be done through understanding, defining and applying "best practices" to our own educational setting. According to Levy (1996), he

supports the impact of administrative and teacher decisions concerning curriculum to match our goals and efforts with children.

If we are not clear about the goal of our effort, our judgments will not be guided by a consistent purpose and understanding. We will lack the discernment to determine how and when to use the methods and materials of our trade. We will either hold on tenaciously to the structures we know or fall prey to the latest fads. (p. 3)

By reviewing a school's academic goals, growth, areas of concern, with teacher and parental input, the building principal can begin to help the staff problem solve to apply the exciting changes of education reform. We will be more focused on the data which supports good practices rather than jumping on the newest bandwagon.

That is how we impact what is taught, we impact how it is taught in a couple of ways, but most importantly through teacher evaluation and support. A common outcry emanating from the classroom is that of, "Come and see me and my children!" Teachers are professionals who know their children very well. They spend too many daily hours with them to not understand them. Evaluation becomes essential. Danielson and McGreal's work on *Teacher Evaluation: to Enhance Professional Practice* (2000), use a model for teachers to maintain their professionalism and expertise while continuing their professional growth and educational reform. By helping practitioners become more reflective and analytical

about their daily practices with children, we can impact how children learn in the classroom. “Give us time to reflect on our work and plan together, and teachers will make radical improvements in the education of children” (Levy, 1996, p. 40).

In observation of effective principals, we are citizen models for children. We model what the outside world will have in store for them. We are busy, we are concerned, we are informed, and we are there to support them. All this is done through modeling. Children pick up on the details of our behavior almost intuitively; this is why modeling is important. If we come up against crises, how do we act and respond? This is the prime teaching example of modeling. Children see and understand that which is modeled for them consistently. Levy (1996) also supports the sense of community in building a child’s sense of self within a learning environment.

A child’s first education in community life is the family. For some children there will be much guidance and good role modeling in learning the joys and struggles of community life: learning how to share, how to take turns, how to set aside personal desires for the good of the group. Other children will have to find a sense of community with little, or even negative, guidance and role modeling from family members. This intensifies the challenge of building community. (p. 161)

Role with Teachers

A building leader's role is not only with children, but also with teachers. What should be my role with the teachers in the building? The most effective administrators are those who are in the buildings and are available and ready to give full attention to what is going on at that moment for the teachers, parents, and students. In recent coursework taken at the University of Northern Iowa a professor states, "That which is done over time; over time is what becomes important" (D. Else, personal communication, August 2001). This implies that a relationship has been established between the building leader and the staff. Lambert (1998) states, "To be in authentic relationship means that we provide long-term support for one another, challenging one another to improve and to question our current perception, and to learn together" (p. 8). A highlighted point of this quote would be to "learn together." A school is a learning community. If you truly believe that if you don't learn, you die, then, learning together is an automatic given. Most mission statements comment that "life-long learners" should be a product of our school systems. Well, then we too must be life long learners. The best way to build relationships and learn is to work together toward a common goal. This makes administrators primary role that of relationship builder. We cannot work together and be successful if we don't care for the outcome

and for each other. An excellent example of leadership and relationship building was Abraham Lincoln.

He gained trust and respect of his subordinates, building strong alliances on both personal and professional levels. He wanted to know how his people would respond in any given situation...He also wanted his subordinates to get to know him, so they would know how he would respond in any given situation (Phillips, 1992, p.27).

Evaluation and professional growth practices can formulate a climate that supports best teacher practices. Teachers need positive, consistent practices by the principal to build culture and climate which fosters learning. Sharp, Walter & Sharp (1998) formulated a standard that states, "A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth" (p. 4). A culture with trust as a "founding father" is ideal to retain and propagate professional teaching and learning.

Successful school leaders are not just the principals; they are the people within the building who have special skills and talents. An administrator needs to recognize these talents and rely on them for successful change and successful learning. Lambert (1998) talks about leadership capacity within a school environment. "Teachers, parents, students and community members held significant leadership roles in the

school...Participation involved skillful dialogue, inquiry, reflection, and problem solving behavior” (p. 68). “Further, these participants discovered and created information through their habitual use of inquiry and innovation. Those involved took collective responsibility for the learning of all students” (p. 69). This also contributes to teachers being involved and feeling valued within the building.

Role with Support Staff

One of the important roles that seem to shroud administration is the role one has with support staff. Secretaries and office administration seem to know everyone and everything. Within that pool of people, many of life’s problems have solutions. They along with students are the heart of the school. A principal’s role with support staff could be one of the most important. An administrator needs to listen and support their dedication to their job wholeheartedly. They are the support a principal needs to do their job effectively. These are the people who help with the managerial aspect of a principalship.

Role with Public and Board

The final role a principal has is the role she or he has with the public and or board of education. Those are the people that best know why education facilities exist. A primary function of education is to help young people learn and realize their productive function or role in society.

The public with the board of education as mediators determines the definition of productive function. “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (Sharp, Walter & Sharp, 1998, p.6). For example, when businesses started using cooperative group projects in the work force, the trickle down effect was that teachers teach the cooperative group roles. Successful administrators support and respond to the needs of the community.

It isn't enough any more for building leaders hide in their building and attend to daily business. Leaders are also in the community actively involved in the arena where children are when they are not at school. The principal role in the community is another critical role. Outside the school building is where we make the biggest difference in the public's perception of education. By communicating with non-educators, principals can educate, learn from and help the schools become a true community-learning environment. It is also where a bridge can be made and a chance to invite the community into the building. It is a commonly known truth that if more people hold a tie to something, more people will value it. This can create better school/community relationships, which affords the

school educators another chance or place for quality education to occur. This community relationship can become a springboard for teacher workshops; student volunteer programs, grants/donations, advice and input, and most importantly maintain positive impressions. On the other hand, it also helps the school find out what the local community expects from the educational process. What skills do community businesses need from the graduating seniors?

Skills and Traits to be Successful

Not only do we have many hats to wear with our roles and commitments, we also have to have personal traits that are developed and honed to be successful within the leadership role. Maxwell's book *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (1999), views leadership as a sense of character tools that when utilized effectively help an aspiring leader achieve greatness. He cites skills such as communication, charisma, vision and kindness as traits that are desirable and necessary for leaders to possess. All of these skills interplay the cohesive strands that many researchers allude to in defining an administrator's position. For example, the role of manager is like an imaginary line through all of these interactions. A manager is one who can balance the human force and the paper force of a job. A manager prioritizes needs and responds accordingly. A manager takes care of the physical building needs and

coordinates everyone's efforts to make sense of the whole picture according to Richard Daft's book (2001) *The Leadership Experience*.

Another imaginary line through these roles is one of leader. A leader is one who is able to lead and build relationships. Daft (2001) states, "Leadership is more than a set of skills; it relies on a number of subtle personal qualities that are hard to see but are very powerful" (p. 19). Some of these qualities include integrity, enthusiasm, courage, and strength, caring. In the past, it may have been that a good manager would be the best for a school, today, it isn't enough. Schools are taking on more challenges and demanding higher standards. Leaders need to be qualified to identify the needs, balance the relationships and personnel, and still be a good manager within the building.

Communication

All of this implies a complexity of the educational leadership role. Communication skills must be strong and sincere. One term used in Daft's (2001) book, talks about "open communication climate" (p. 320). The definition is communication moves across committees, students, teachers, parents and community members. It is a break down of traditional hierarchical management. Daft (2001) states that, "Open communication builds trust, which is an essential element in effective leader-follower relationships because it inspires collaboration and commitment to common

goals" (p. 320). This is a risk and challenge to old-school management styles. Risk being that of power of one person because the multitude of people has the same information. It is also healthy in that if you have an open communication policy, then creativity and objectives are more easily attained and motivation is increased.

Building Relationships

Communication is a stepping-stone to building relationships within learning communities that benefit the educational system. In the current society, relationships are valued. The definition, "Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purpose" (Daft 2001 p. 5). In fact, if change is needed in an environment, relationships are critical to the change being successful. If a leader hasn't spent time building the relationship foundation, then the change process will create stress that will aggravate and deviate from the intended purpose (Video: The Power of their Ideas.)

Once relationships have been established, change with a cohesive, collaborative building can begin. To move forward with learning, curriculum and meeting students' needs, research is showing that our learning styles and teaching processes have to change. In H. Lynne Erickson's text *Stirring the Head, Heart, and Soul: Redefining*

Curriculum and Instruction (2001), she talks about the complexity of our educational market. Educators are trying to meet the needs of a global, changing market. Politicians are passing laws with regulations and mandates for schools to meet. Parents are also becoming more educated about the educational process. All of these communities need the communication and relationships to meet this changing environment.

Relationships are valuable when working with parents, and even more valuable when working with teachers. "Among the more important tasks for the principal is to establish collegial relationships in an environment that may previously have fostered dependency relationships" (Lambert, 1998, p. 24). Some strategies to be successful at forming these relationships are to (a) ask for recommendations, (b) ask for help in analyzing solutions, (c) help teachers learn to negotiate and (d) discuss solutions (p. 25). These strategies will help teachers move from the previous "old school" mentality of principals having the answers to forming relationships that find answers together. Teachers who are empowered and feel valued lead schools better than an individual administrator.

Leading with Vision

Last, creating a vision within in a school for meaningful, measurable learning to occur is important. "Visions that work help the

organization achieve bold change. Vision is about action and challenges people to make important changes toward a better future" (Daft 2001, p. 479). Johnson (2000), author of *Who Moved My Cheese?*, says it this way, "Imagining myself enjoying new cheese even before I find it, leads me to it" (p.58). Creating the vision even if you don't know all the possibilities, changes, and details is important when leading people through the change process. A successful piece for defining and writing a school vision is to provide a framework or context to place your building in. In the state of Iowa, we are required to do Comprehensive School Improvement Plans. In these, administrators are required to measure and define goals to work on for the school or district. To add to this piece is a school portfolio. In V. Bernhardt's (1999) book, *The School Portfolio: A Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement*, the author states that to be successful in our restructuring processes, we need to first think of "rethinking our processes instead of restructuring them," (p. 3) and "an overview of the process followed by a comprehensive view of the elements within the process is needed" (p. 4). The purpose of her book is to provide a framework that tells a school's story. It describes where they are at and where they will be going in a variety of ways: through narratives and through data. From the school portfolio, a school can move toward a common vision Sharp, Walter & Sharp (1998) states the first

performance standard as, “A school administrator is an educational leaders who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, and implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community” (p. 3). Leading with vision toward the future while knowing the past leads to the next trait.

Leading with Balance

There are a variety of tools to be utilized when a leader is trying to create and lead. An important tool is to find balance in your job and at home. Stephen Covey has been a long standing guru in this area. Mr. Covey believed that balance is needed to lead an accomplished and meaningful life. Balance is needed in all the roles of a principal. It is perhaps one of the most crucial. A leader needs to work and dream with the people. A leader needs to complete his or her duty to the position. A leader needs to have a vision (Covey 1990). All of this takes balance. You can be a dreamer and never complete the state regulation forms due last June. That is not balance. If a principal ignores the staff, but pays lots of attention to the students, the neglect of the staff fosters mistrust. That is not being an effective administrator. Balance is crucial.

One last thought on what makes a good administrator good is the thought that building leaders are here to make a difference. Principals are

here for children; they know that they can impact their lives. Tied with that is the desire to impact the lives of others in a positive manner. Our vision is to see schools meet the needs of children so that they can meet the needs of the future. What type of legacy do we leave if not one that is positive? Our vision is to assure that all students and teachers are treated equitably and each has the best environment possible to learn.

These developed traits are supported by Dr. Allan Glatthorn's (2000) book. While his text is specifically about curriculum leadership, the thoughts are prevalent throughout the leadership process in building an effective learning environment where measurable learning occurs while supporting individual classrooms and building needs. Glatthorn (2000) states,

The second recommendation is that the principal understand that curriculum leadership does not exist in a vacuum but is simply a component of effective organizational behavior. In their study of effective curriculum leaders, Aronstein and DeBenedictis (1998) determined that such principals used behaviors that had a schoolwide impact rather than a narrowly focused curriculum emphasis. They identified five "enabling behaviors" that made schoolwide differences: (a) facilitating communication, (b) creating a positive open climate, (c) building a vision with the staff, (d) developing staff through involvement, and (e) being an effective and positive role model (p. 28).

How a leader fulfills these components will determine the success of the students in learning and the teachers in facilitating learning all while

involving and informing the public about the school.

Conclusion

Throughout the University of Northern Iowa's educational leadership program, future administrators have been asked to articulate beliefs regarding educational leadership. This list encompasses what successful leadership should entail: a.) Always make decisions that are best for the child. b.) Build relationships of trust. c.) Involve the community to build a learning community. These three strands are linked with the need for honest communication, curriculum knowledge, cooperative collaboration, and a community vision. This is an exciting time to be in education, there is a need to use that change as a catalyst to mold our educational system to meet the needs of our children as learners. These three principals are interwoven in my beliefs about what education should be. If we all work towards the betterment of our children, our children will be better than we are.

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