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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

Throughout my life I have tried to engage myself in activities that were opportunities for me to "make a difference." Whether it be involvement in community clean-up projects or parks and recreation programs for children, my intentions were always to use my time to do good for a cause or another person. I carried this belief with me into college while I was in search of what I wanted to become "when I grew up." I looked in several directions on the basis of some fundamental goals I had for myself. First, I knew I wanted to be in a position in which I could positively influence other people. I wanted people to be better after having known me than they were before. Next, I wanted to impact the future. I hoped that whatever it was I was doing today would somehow carry on in someone else tomorrow. Finally, I was looking for an environment in which I could make decisions and to collaborate with others. I wanted to belong to a group of people who worked towards the same goals, shared ideas, and inspired one another. After having defined these goals, it became very clear that education was where I belonged, and where I could once again "make a difference."

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
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In Partial Fulfillment
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by
Brenda M. Boleyn

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"The only reason for becoming a principal is a belief that you can make a difference" (J. Albrecht, personal communication, June 1992).

Throughout my life I have tried to engage myself in activities that were opportunities for me to "make a difference." Whether it be involvement in community clean-up projects or parks and recreation programs for children, my intentions were always to use my time to do good for a cause or another person. I carried this belief with me into college while I was in search of what I wanted to become "when I grew up." I looked in several directions on the basis of some fundamental goals I had for myself. First, I knew I wanted to be in a position in which I could positively influence other people. I wanted people to be better after having known me than they were before. Next, I wanted to impact the future. I hoped that whatever it was I was doing today would somehow carry on in someone else tomorrow. Finally, I was looking for an environment in which I could make decisions and

collaborate with others. I wanted to belong to a group of people who worked towards the same goals, shared ideas, and inspired one another. After having defined these goals, it became very clear that education was where I belonged, and where I could once again "make a difference."

Needless to say, I pursued an education and received a degree that enabled me to teach at the elementary/early childhood level. I accepted my first position as a kindergarten teacher fresh out of college and very eager to have my own classroom of bright, smiling children. I started out the year as scared about my first day of school as my group of five- and six-year olds were about their first day of school. That soon passed and we, the students and I, progressed through a wonderful year together! It was one of the most rewarding experiences I have had. Our class made a lot of important discoveries together. Many people are familiar with the poem, "All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" (Fluhum, 1988). It stresses the importance of all the basic,

simple things we learn early in life and often easily forget in our complex, day-to-day life as adults. It upholds important values such as sharing, cooperation, showing respect and appreciation for others, and life-long learning. The students and I talked about these values and what they meant to us. We practiced them on a daily basis, and although the ABC's and 123's were important components in our curriculum, these values were integrated into everything we did, and just as the poem says, were essentially the most important things they would learn from me that entire year, perhaps even their entire life.

Interestingly enough, as I reflect on my relationships with my students, these values were fundamental to the success we experienced together. I also realize now how fundamental these values were in working with other teachers and staff in our school. These values were crucial elements to success in working on curriculum, designing schedules, staff development, and numerous other areas related to student needs.

As I look forward to the role of principal, these values serve to form the basis for my leadership style and expand into important components of my vision. Every school needs a sense of direction and I, as principal, will be in the best position to provide the necessary sense of direction to the various aspects of a school. Research has demonstrated that the most effective principals have a clear sense of purpose and priorities and, perhaps more importantly, are able to enlist the support of others towards these ends (Hughes & Ubben, 1989). Based on my beliefs about myself and about the role others, primarily teachers, play in education, I struggle to clarify and define leadership as it applies to the elementary principalship. I also struggle to articulate what my vision of an effective school is and how that vision will guide me in that role. I have derived ideas from personal experiences, from professional experiences, from discussions in my courses, from reading other people's ideas, and now I must bring them all together to create a clear picture or vision. It could be compared to

fitting the pieces of a puzzle together. Several pieces of the puzzle must come together to complete the picture. "Teachers as leaders" is a common thread throughout because I truly believe they have the power to make change happen. When I assume an administrative role, I will have the opportunity to give teachers, who are leaders in their own right, a voice in determining what our schools need to be and how they will get there. I will carry out my vision through several avenues: instructional leadership, the creation of a community of leaders and learners, and collaboration which will be the cornerstone of my vision.

Instructional Leadership

"Your greatest contribution to mankind is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student every day learns and grows and feels like a real human being" (R. Decker, personal communication, June 1995).

An instructional leader is someone who has a significant impact, hopefully positive, on student opportunities to learn in

the classroom. The role of instructional leadership by a principal is very broad. The principal's responsibilities include inservice improvement activities, including faculty meetings and study sessions, institute days, and special programs. Curriculum development procedures and planning involve the principal. He/she is a central figure in setting goals for instruction and providing direction to the overall philosophy of education for the school. The principal makes the master schedule which is the instructional plan for presenting the curriculum to students, assigning teachers, classrooms, and time. The principal oversees development and implementation of evaluation and grading systems, which in turn become permanent records of each student's achievement in the school's program of studies. Within the school organization itself the principal provides for students with special needs and talents. This involves special education, special services, ability grouping, and extracurricular activities. The principal shares in responsibility for the

allocation of resources. He/she frequently exercises control over the budget that provides for staffing, instructional materials, equipment, aides to teachers, as well as the professional resources. In addition, the principal is legally required to carry out the mandates of the state and of his/her local board of education. The most important of these are those requiring that certain areas of instruction be taught by properly certified and qualified teachers (Weldy, 1979). In addition to all of the aforementioned aspects of instructional leadership, perhaps the greatest influence comes from a principal's direct involvement in the hiring of personnel as well as the ongoing supervision of those who have been employed. I feel that in my own personal role as principal I will invest considerable time and energy in this process. I recognize the importance of classroom teachers in promoting learning and will therefore give this responsibility priority. I plan to continue educating myself as to what "good teaching" looks like, as well as develop networks that would include

teacher educators at universities and colleges to help me locate and identify talented teachers.

An instructional leader needs to use the evaluation process to remove factors hindering good teaching performance. My vision includes an evaluation process which is open and on-going. Supervisory efforts must reflect the teacher's needs and be communicated in trust and with the growth of the teacher in mind so a dialogue of communication can occur as well as increased motivation and inspiration (Knoll, 1987). Fear, lack of trust, and heavily bureaucratic practices act as barriers to real teacher improvement. I will use four principles suggested by Edwards (1995) to guide my effort in encouraging real professional growth among staff members:

1. Growth and development are best achieved in an environment marked by mutual respect and trust.
2. Teachers are professionals and will make responsible decisions about their growth and development.

3. Teachers will provide a caring classroom environment for all students in an atmosphere that facilitates learning.

4. Reflection and analysis are essential for the professional growth of teachers and the successful practice of teaching. (p. 72)

A professional growth plan that allows for teacher input for growth and self-responsibility is essential. It must also include collaborative planning and conferencing between the teacher and the principal. Together, we develop a plan, identify strategies for improvement or growth, and summarize the results in terms of student learning. More important than procedure is the process of nurturing the states of growth in professionals (Edwards, 1995). Throughout the schoolyear I would be available to confer with individuals, to offer continuous informal feedback, and to advise, support, and monitor growth.

Professional growth among teachers will ultimately encourage growth in student learning. I agree with Robert F. Cunard (1990) in that the principal who shares instructional leadership with teachers does not, in essence, give up the responsibility for leadership. It is this principal whose instructional leadership is most effective because empowered teachers are those who are most likely to maximize their own potential.

Building a Community of Leaders and Learners

"It takes a village to raise a child." African Proverb

Communities are, in essence, places where members are bonded to one another by mutual commitments and special relationships. A community's members share a set of ideas and values that they feel compelled to follow. People belong and feel responsible for themselves and for others (Sergiovanni, 1995). I envision a school that connects people to people to build community; connects elements of the curriculum to achieve coherence; and connects learning to life

to build character (Boyer, 1995). Committing to this piece of my vision requires a different approach than the theories of leadership, management, and organization that now dominate school administration. My role as principal will definitely be different allowing for more authority to be put into the hands of frontline practitioners. I will apply the lessons I've learned in the classroom to my relationships with teachers and parents. Just as we need to motivate, involve, and engross students in the learning process, we must do the same for other members of our "school community." It is necessary to involve the education community in a meaningful way. To do this requires the admission that we can't do it alone.

Redefining Leadership Roles

A community of leaders requires the engagement of everyone in contributing to and benefitting from the leadership of others. Teachers, media specialists, counselors, parents, and students need to be encouraged to believe in many things and make many of them happen. Along with that they need to

be "visionary" themselves. They need to question why things are the way they are and contribute alternatives that will be seriously considered. I feel many of today's principals give lip service to this notion, but do not support it with action.

I must work together with the school staff to redefine itself as a community responsible for setting and reaching its own goals and capable of managing its own resources. This redefinition establishes new working relationships among all players. As principal I will operate as the formal leader of this group, cautious not to control, monitor, and direct, but rather treat as a responsible community of adults. As a new principal I will need to start by setting in place together the groundwork on which future collective action can occur. Three operating principles will form the foundation for this collective partnership:

1. Responsibility and authority go hand in hand.
2. Children and adults learn best in trusting communities in which every person is both a learner and a resource for learning.

3. All adult members of the school staff care for the institution and community as a whole as well as for their primary roles in it. (Donaldson, 1993, p. 15)

This community of leaders will take the shape of an advisory group comprised of as varied a representation from the faculty and staff as possible. Parents, and even students in some instances, will also be encouraged to be involved. This advisory group will work together to make important decisions to continually foster school improvement. Training in the areas of communication as well as decision-making will be essential to the success of this group's efforts. It is my hope that this community of leaders will work through a continuous cycle of progression that includes needs assessment, setting goals and objectives for the school, and developing realistic approaches to achieving those goals (National School Public Relations Association, 1992).

Developing a Life-long Learning Environment

Without a school and community culture that supports ongoing learning, student achievement is unlikely to improve.

The challenge is to open avenues for informed conversation and for becoming informed. My intent as principal would be to make our school a learning community for faculties as well as students. I envision a setting where the conditions of the workplace support continuous, collegial inquiry where faculties continuously examine and improve teaching and learning, and where students study not only what they are learning in the curricular sense, but also their own capability as learners (Schaefer, 1967).

I will explore several approaches to create my desired learning community. First, I will encourage ongoing study of the learning environment itself. Inquiry involves collecting, analyzing, and reflecting on data. Schools are information-rich. Faculties have access to grades and referrals and can generally interpret how often and how well students are comprehending material. However, I feel it is also important to collect data about students' feelings about their sense of independence and their developing concepts of themselves as

effective human beings. This information can enrich a faculty's understanding of student behaviors and responses to the learning opportunities provided. If something isn't working for a child or a group of children, people acknowledge it and try something else. The realization must be that teaching is a never-ending process of trying to reach all the kids in the best ways possible. In combination with this information gathering and analyzing, time must be made to allow staff to make the information usable. Without collective study time it is not possible to move forward as a learning community. People need one another's ideas for stimulation, and we need one another's perspectives to enrich our own. Investigating the possibilities of restructuring job assignments and/or schedules to build in time for collective inquiry may be necessary. In addition, a principal must help to connect the faculty to the knowledge base that now exists on teaching, curriculum, and technology that can help faculties think about possible solutions to problems (Wang, Haertel, &

Walberg, 1993). This connection can expand the possibilities for effective action as faculty members locate efforts and perspectives that they have not been previously aware of. Staff development opportunities should be used to foster this connection. The content of staff development should be organized so that as new practices and innovations are identified and tried, the faculty can immediately and systematically study their effects. Models of teaching are not static practices to be put in place, but rather models of learning that launch further study of students and how they learn (Joyce & Showers, 1995).

One major dimension of schooling is creating a caring community for children. A second dimension must be developing the professionals who work within that community. Building closer professional communities, developing a democratic decision-making process, and including the study of teaching into the work day will certainly help to build the community of leaders and learners I envision. The literature

suggests that the caring dimension depends to a large extent on creating organizations where many small groups see themselves as not only working together to get the job done, but also as responsible for supporting one another in developing personally and professionally. In other words, the larger community both supports and is supported by small groups charged with inquiring into teaching and learning, and supporting one another and the organization as a collective unit (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995).

Creating a community of leaders and learners indicates a sustained relationship between educators, students, and even parents involving mutual expectations, responsibilities, and benefits. It evolves out of the recognition that our students will not reach their potential if educators work in isolation. As the village comes together around its children, however, we can see the future taking shape before our eyes.

Collaboration

"Snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look what they can do when they stick together"

(Clinton, 1996, p. 20).

The final piece of the puzzle inherent in my vision is collaboration. It is necessary to understand what collaboration means if it is to be an effective process in improving our system of education. Collaborations are "those efforts that unite and empower individuals and organizations to accomplish collectively what they could not accomplish independently" (Lieberman, 1986, p. 4). I feel collaboration at the local level has the greatest potential to be an effective tool to help improve the quality, comprehensiveness, and availability of education services in a school. I envision a school that not only believes in partnerships occurring within the walls of the school, but also reaching out beyond the playground to involve the larger community. Collaboration is a process that is used to describe many different entities:

councils, task forces, planning committees, interagency cabinets, coalitions, and so forth. Collaborations tend to focus on seven major goals that include:

1. increasing the quality and quantity of services for children and families;
2. ensuring more equitable distribution of services;
3. minimizing expenses and service duplications;
4. addressing staff and space shortages;
5. equalizing regulations across education programs;
6. improving training opportunities; and
7. building public support and advocacy for education. (Kagan & Rivera, 1991, p. 51)

Strong leadership is imperative if collaboration is to take place. Not only the employees of the school, but also the community the school serves need to have a shared "vision" of what we want our schools to be and continue to strive towards.

A traditional way of involving community members in the schools is through volunteer programs. I believe this is an excellent way for community members to actually see and understand what is going on in schools. Collaboration also occurs, probably in its most intense form, at the local level when a school engages in school-based management. The purpose of school-based management is to reach out to all members of a school community. These diverse groups work together to make important decisions for a school (National School Public Relations Association, 1992). Other working examples of collaboration in education I would want to consider as principal include school-business partnerships and social service agency partnerships. The term "collaboration" implies to me a two-way process, therefore we must also look at ways in which schools can give back to the community. School is the single societal institution that can truly be an advocate, a resource, and a catalyst for children and families, as well as learners of all ages (Lepley, 1992). Throughout the

course of my practicum experience I participated in a study team for children at risk. It was clear to me that the problems students were experiencing in school were not isolated from experiences they were having at home, and often the source of the problems needed to be dealt with wholistically. Students can't be expected to learn when they are hungry, sick, or deeply unhappy. As principal of a school, I can't ignore these problems and their effects on learning, and the school can't solve the problems alone. I feel schools need to open the door to begin communicating and working together with other community, county, and state social and health agencies in helping students and families in need.

An innovative principal's plan would also include the establishment of opportunities to collaborate in a broader context as well. Relationships with area education agencies and communtiy colleges, as well as the utilization of technology must be in place to secure the support needed to be an effective school.

Area Education Agencies (AEAs)

AEAs are extremely well positioned to facilitate transformation of schools because of their ability to bring groups together in a concerted way to help families and children. They can create awareness of the need for change, share best practices and emerging research, and provide support when an interest develops in new approaches. Iowa AEAs provide services in curriculum and staff development, research and planning, data processing, special education, and media. They can most certainly be a resource in the area of technology as well. AEAs will also serve as a central source of information and advice on shared decision making, assessment techniques and other school reform topics (AEAs Target, 1992).

Community Colleges

An area college can provide many resources to a local school, including sharing of instructors, help in meeting the needs of people with disabilities, resources for a community

education program, partnerships in community and economic development activities, technology enhancements, and assistance with staff development programs (Lepley, 1992). They also offer valuable human resources. During the course of my practicum experience, our school utilized students from the community college who sought a degree in the education field and wanted hands-on experience in an elementary school setting.

Technology

At every level of collaboration it will be necessary to incorporate technology effectively in bringing ideas from throughout the world to our very own students (O'Kones, 1990). With few exceptions, children's domains of discovery during the school day are limited to the classroom and the school. Technological tools allow students to inexpensively and instantly reach around the world, learning first-hand about other cultures. Various technologies can provide up-to-date maps and demographic data, and computer-based wire services

can bring a stream of current events into the school (Peck & Dorricott, 1994). Teachers can get "on-line" and access everything from lesson plans to teach a specific unit, to research supporting the latest teaching and learning strategies.

Educators have encouraged students from the first day of kindergarten up to the day of graduation to play together, learn together, work together, and live together as a whole. As a future leader in education, I feel I must also follow this advice if I am to influence education for our students in a way that I can truly be proud of. Collaboration is certainly the cornerstone of my vision, as the challenges existing today will inspire change for tomorrow. If I, as principal, want individuals to accept that change they must feel they are involved in it. If I want them to welcome that change they must feel they have initiated it.

"Vision without action is merely a dream; action without vision just passes the time; vision with action can change the world" (Barker, 1992).

In conclusion, my vision is an extension of the things I value. I value a relationship of reciprocal trust and professionalism between teachers and administrators. I value an environment in which life-long learning exists among staff and is modeled for students. Finally, I value an atmosphere of collaborating with others to work towards common goals. As I assume the role of a new principalship I hope to identify and support the goals of our school with enthusiasm. Together we will develop a "shared vision," with commitment put action to our words, and with hope, see our efforts come together to create positive change for children.

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