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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

My father has been a major influence to me in seeking the duty role of a principalship. I have many memories of my father's role as principal through all stages of my life. It is interesting to reflect on my thoughts and perceptions of the principalship as I have grown from a small child to a young adult. When I was very young, my father's school was the place we went to on Saturday. We would play in the halls, find the rooms with fish, animals and other interesting displays, and the big highlight was drinking a carton of milk in the lunchroom like the school kids did. At this time, I didn't realize we were there because my father was trying to finish up a weeks' work. In my perception we went there to play!

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Mikell Ann Brosamle

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My father has been a major influence to me in seeking the duty role of a principalship. I have many memories of my father's role as principal through all stages of my life. It is interesting to reflect on my thoughts and perceptions of the principalship as I have grown from a small child to a young adult. When I was very young, my father's school was the place we went to on Saturday. We would play in the halls, find the rooms with fish, animals and other interesting displays, and the big highlight was drinking a carton of milk in the lunchroom like the school kids did. At this time, I didn't realize we were there because my father was trying to finish up a weeks' work. In my perception we went there to play!

As I grew older I would go with my father and bring my briefcase with school papers. I would sit at the secretary's desk and pretend to do my work because my father was doing his work. I would take imaginary phone calls and run messages to classrooms. When my younger brother came along we would play school. We'd go in a classroom and I would teach him. Sometimes we'd even pack our sack lunches and eat in the lunchroom. At this stage in my life I recognized that my father was at school to work. I would go with him almost every Saturday to finish my school work too! I had an imaginary job at his school.

As I grew older I would go with my father and work on the computers and sometimes he even had things with which I could help him. This is when I began to realize the time and demands of his job. I not only realized the hours he put into his job at school, but also at home. I remember the many phone calls he received, some that I thought were trivial, but he treated each phone call with importance and respect.

Reflecting on my experiences of growing up in an education-oriented family, I realize the influences that I had most people do not have in their lifetime. I had direct exposure to educational leadership at all stages in my life. I often wonder if that's what sparked my interest in administration. Even in junior high and high school, I remember wondering if my current principals put as much time into their job as my father did.

The administrative classes I have taken have brought to my attention a vast array of issues involved in the principalship. It is overwhelming to me that one person is required to be knowledgeable of so many areas. It seems impossible, but I know it can be done because there are many principals who are currently doing just that. My father and I visit often and discuss issues and trends in education. He has mentioned many times that principals learn by doing and then reflecting upon the action. He has shared that each action must be evaluated and reflected upon. Reflective questions such as, "How would I have done it differently?" "What went well?" "What did not go well?" and "What did I learn?" are vital in most anything a principal does. Visits with my father and the classes I've taken have reinforced the importance of knowing the right questions to ask.

I think often of the schools I attended and the principals and teachers who prepared me for my adult life. I've focused on the principals who administered the schools I attended. I've found myself trying to recall their personalities and work-related traits as to what kind of an educational leader they were. I've found my junior high and high school principal the easiest to think about because I feel my thoughts were more maturely based because I was older. Although I remember my elementary principal as being the friendliest and most visible, and the most

concerned for me. I guess I just feel like every kid has to love their elementary principal. After all, we were taught that he/she was our pal! I had the opportunity to visit with my father about my feelings and it was most interesting that both of us had the same opinion on which principal was the strongest educational leader.

I've also looked back at my school years to speculate if the teachers were involved in decision making or if the principal was the main person involved in the decision making process. Again, I looked back at my past principals and their personalities to base my decisions. I decided that the majority of my principals probably made the decisions and ran their schools in a top down fashion. When visiting with my father he quickly reminded me that even 20 years ago not every principal managed his building in that fashion. Experience will teach a person quickly that being a boss with all the power will not lead a person far in any matter, but sharing the power will benefit everyone involved is the philosophy I've learned from my classes and my father. I've also learned this in my own teaching experience. I've worked for a principal who demands power. He treats his faculty as though we are not his equal or part of his team. He makes it known that he is our boss and we are his teachers. Many times I look at situations in my school and I decide that he causes many of his own problems as well as headaches. I have learned from this though. In fact, in my journal it's under the heading of what I have learned not to do as a building principal. This is just as valuable to me as what I have learned to do. I've decided that humans must learn from all walks of life.

The last few years of my life I have seen a rapidly changing society. The changing demographics have dramatically altered the makeup of student population since my day in school. Increasing rates of poverty, divorce, single parenting, teen

pregnancy, family mobility and instability, and employment outside the home by women with children have placed many families under great stress. It seems as though the majority of attempts to educate these children adequately have been unsuccessful. I believe we're in a time when parents and schools need each other more than ever. Even though it's not the school's fault, they are held accountable for better educational results of the children. I believe that parental involvement is becoming a major component of efforts to restructure schools throughout the nation. In the near future parents will need to become more involved in schooling. To achieve better school systems we have to re-create families and communities, now seriously disorganized, in new forms for all social classes. Parental involvement, linking society, schools and homes, is a vital tool for these changes. I do want to make the point that parental involvement is not an educational panacea. For children to be better educated and for schools to reform many other things need to happen. For example, we need to find the right way to educate children for a changing economical and social world. We need to reassert the place of education in developing values and civil behavior. And parents, or their substitutes, have to raise children who are, more than ever before, on their own.

In my four years in the field of education and throughout my life I have learned the importance of effective communication. My father has taught me that no matter what a person does in life, they must communicate effectively to succeed. As a teacher, I realize that effective communication doesn't just happen; it is the result of thoughtful planning and conscious effort. As a school leader, I believe there is no single skill more important than the ability to communicate effectively. Solid communication is vital in providing students and staff with clear

organizational goals and expectations. In order to develop good staff morale and positive parental support, communication must be timely, accurate and include complete information (R. Bodensteiner, personal communication, Summer 1993).

As an administrator, I must be receptive to information from others to be a competent communicator. As an educational leader two-way communication would allow me to benefit from the knowledge, expertise and perspectives of teachers and other staff members. Two-way communication would also help me to understand what parents and others in the community expect from the school. I firmly believe that in establishing effective communication channels the school administration must set the example.

The experiences I've had will give me some insight on the role of an administrator, but the reality of the principalship will not truly become a part of me until I actually take the position of a principal. As I work towards a new phase in my career as an educator, I must reflect on the role of leadership. I often ask myself, "How does one prepare for the challenges in the role of leadership?" In the classes I've taken I've learned there are many elements involved in effective leadership. In this paper I have chosen to discuss shared decision making, parental involvement, expanding the role of leadership, communication, and vision because I believe they are essential to leadership. It is the purpose of this paper to reflect on these roles.

Shared Decision Making

In the past, many people have assumed that the principal, as an instructional leader, bore the main if not the sole responsibility for bringing change to a school. A top-down view of change prevailed in those days; the principal was expected to

engage the teachers, who were otherwise seen as passive participants in the process of change and decision making.

John Naisbitt (1982) cites 10 major trends that appear to be guiding social development throughout America, and one of them provides a key concept for school management. Naisbitt indicates that there seems to be a shift away from representative decision making toward patterns that are more participatory.

Americans in every corner of society want to influence the decisions that will govern their lives. School administrators have begun to develop a greater capacity for involving teachers in decisions that go far beyond their job conditions.

One way to keep the principal at the forefront of school improvement without carrying an unreasonable portion of the burden is to form a decision making team in which teachers share the responsibilities with the principal. The participation of the principal is pivotal. Beck and Hillmar (1987) say that principals who seek help with the decision making process are leaders, willing to work closely with teachers to implement change once it has been introduced by others. They seldom initiate change on their own. These principals consider the interests of teachers, the school, and the district before making decisions. In fact, I believe they will often protect their teachers from what they perceive as excessive demands. Teachers working under this kind of principal would feel comfortable with their job and be more actively involved.

It allows each person to realize that with the mantle of authority comes responsibilities that extend beyond one's own classroom. Barth (1988) points out that shared decision making has many benefits for a school community. The relationships between the teachers and principals are strengthened and the shared

experiences have a bonding effect. Shared decision making also allows faculty members to accept part of the role of leadership.

It is not easy for principals to operate in such a self-effacing manner. Some principals feel they already have too little influence, and that it is illogical to cede to others the small amount of power that remains in their hands (Barth, 1988).

Kenneth Leithwood (1992) says principals have learned through shared decision making that the role of the principal is not primarily to make unilateral decisions, but to manage the process of decision making. The greatest obstacle to change at the beginning of the process are the people whom the process is trying to empower. Trust must exist between the principal and teachers. The test of that trust is whether it continues when things go wrong, and mistakes are an acceptable part of the change process.

I believe trust is essential to make shared decision making work. To begin the restructuring process in my school, I would involve board members from the beginning. I view their participation as essential to legitimize the process and to ease communication. As a school leader I would also take the time needed to build trust with my staff and community. In my administrative classes I have learned that developing the staff as a team is an invaluable way to begin shared decision making. As a team it would be necessary to commit to operate by consensus, respect one another's styles, speak honestly, advocate the team's decisions, and to be patient (J. Doud, personal communication, Fall 1992). As an administrator, I must realize that reaching a group consensus takes more time and patience than making decisions in a traditional top down system. There is no room for unspoken agendas or behind the scenes manipulations. It is essential that individual

members' concerns be acknowledged and that the necessary time be taken to deal with them as they arise. I believe that making a mutual commitment to work by consensus and to base decisions on the best interest of kids is the heart of shared decision making.

In schools with a trusting, caring climate, administrators and teachers respect one another's intellects, actions, and personal and professional needs. Each encourages the other to make decisions and act. They empower and support one another. Judy Krupp (1993) says:

Educators who respect and trust themselves enough to act on their beliefs while supporting the vision of the school feel internal peace. These educators put their values, beliefs, thoughts and feelings into actions and by so doing, they achieve the integrity of an integrated self. (p. 20)

Parental Involvement

Problems abound outside the classroom. Community and family support of the schools has decreased over the years, although I believe it is slowly reviving. Hodgkinson (1991) suggests that changes in living styles have resulted in new behavioral patterns that place considerable stress on children. It seems as though there are more government regulations and more paper work. Teacher and administrator burnout is very real. Educators fight constantly to protect instructional time and to retain some control over a school's daily activities.

As school populations increasingly reflect families with single parents or two working parents, the schools are beginning to serve new functions. More communities are starting to use school buildings for purposes other than those which end at three o'clock.

The key element in the kind of parent involvement that most benefits children is a sense of partnership between parents and school personnel. There needs to be an understanding that it takes both to achieve positive outcomes for children. Kamerman and Hayes (1991) state that :

Successful programs not only believe in this concept, but articulate what each partner brings to the partnership; that parents are not only a child's first teacher, but are also the tie that integrates what a child learns and experiences; and that teachers enter and exit the child's life at different stages, supplying a depth of knowledge of subject matter content and skills, as well as individual variations in behavior and learning styles. (p. 108)

I believe in order for such a cooperative spirit to prevail, both sides of the partnership must acknowledge the contributions of the other and the necessity of a reciprocal relationship. Solving problems become the responsibility of both parents and school personnel.

Hodgkinson (1991) notes the rapid change in the American family structure in the last few decades. There is an extreme impact of these demographics on the involvement by parents whose children are now entering elementary schools in our country. In the past, neighbors, teachers, and parents spoke in a common voice. James Comer (1990) tells a childhood story about how his mother and his teacher would meet at the local A & P grocery store. They would talk about his progress and behavior in school, sharing and reinforcing family and school values. He writes:

When schools were an integral part of stable communities, teachers quite naturally reinforced parental and community values. At school, children

easily formed bonds with adults and experienced a sense of continuity and stability, conditions that were highly conducive to learning. (p. 23)

This appears to be a disappearing pattern. For many children today, the kinds of communities described and the ready support of nearby relatives and friends have vanished. I even feel safe saying that parents seldom run into their children's teachers at the local grocery store which says much about the many changes that have taken place in our society.

It is critical for school principals to recognize that the traditional activities which in the past brought parents into the schools--plays, parties, day-time activities--no longer fit the lifestyle of many parents. Kamerman and Hayes (1989) say that parents who work and have limited home time will choose how to spend that time very carefully, and will not use it on activities in which they do not see a direct benefit to their children. Principals should be careful not to interpret the failure of parents to participate in some traditional activities as a desire to be uninvolved in their children's schooling. Many of these activities take place during the school day and conflict with work schedules. It is important for a principal to look for other ways to involve parents who cannot participate but wish to remain connected to the school. As a future principal, I realize that schools have a changing clientele which consists of both students and parents. This challenge must be resolved by strengthening the parents' role in the schools, both by reinforcing their relationship with the school and by helping and encouraging parents in their own critical job of teaching the young.

Expanding the Role of Leadership

The elementary school principalship is a position in transition. I have found myself asking, "What is the role of today's elementary principal?" Strong and Mc Vaein's (1990) study of principals identifies school management as the predominant focus of the elementary principalship. They note that a principal's day has a multiplicity of tasks and a diversity of functions. A typical day for every principal in the study was characterized by a great number of unrelated tasks, with most requiring relatively brief periods of time. I found it interesting that when a particular activity required a substantial time commitment, it was often initiated and then laid aside until later in the day, or even several days later. The principal's day also had a diversity of activities related to school management. Principals have clerical tasks, budgetary responsibilities, building maintenance, noninstructional monitoring activities, and general office duties. It has become very obvious to me that a principal's role is much more than an instructional leader. A principal is a person who indeed wears many hats. This is so overwhelming to me it almost puts me in a state of panic just thinking about it.

Many expectations have been added to the principal's role. Some current responsibilities that have been added since I've been teaching are shared decision making, choice, vision and community involvement in school. I have also seen a flurry of new instructional approaches such as team teaching, writing across the curriculum, thematic approaches to content areas, and authentic assessment. It seems to me that administrators are being asked to shed many of the roles of the instructional leader. Mary Poplin (1992) supports this belief and states that instructional leadership has outlived its usefulness. The education profession now

calls on administrators to stimulate collective vision and to serve as editors, cheerleaders, problem solvers, and resource finders. In the past I have viewed administrators at the top of the hierarchy of a school. I must agree with Poplin that administrators are now being placed at the top and the bottom of the hierarchy instead of just at the top. I believe that part of the administrator's role is to be self-conscious about change and encourage it in others to promote the growth that must take place in a school system. Daniel Duke (1987) humorously describes the principal's expanding role:

Sometimes I think the hiring of a principal should follow the script of the TV adventure show, "Mission Impossible": "Good morning. Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to see that 560 young people perform at or above grade level in language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and physical education; to teach character and good manners to students and teachers alike; to prevent self-esteem from being diminished; to preserve order without squashing freedom of inquiry; to recognize the achievement of slowest learner as well as the superstar; to see that respect is accorded to students of different cultures, races, and socioeconomic status; to ensure that buses arrive and depart with the right students aboard, and that lunches are served on time; to make the school a neat and inviting place, even if that means personally picking up litter; and be certain that students bring the learning materials they need and leave behind their skateboards, beepers, and boom boxes. Should you fail, the school board will disavow any knowledge of what you have done. This tape will self destruct in five seconds. (p. 295)

Communication

Justin Murphy (1988) suggests that a school's image--as viewed by its teachers, students, staff, parents and the public--greatly depends on its public relations. In turn, public relations depend greatly on the principal. He also believes that it does not matter what a school district offers because in the area of school community relations, it is the principal who makes or breaks a school's public relations program. As a prospective principal, I believe that my primary concern to establish an effective public relations program would be to set a positive school climate. My hopes would be that modeling would encourage all school personnel to do their best.

The importance of communication, not only in the classroom but throughout the school environment, is almost axiomatic. The potential for payoff is enormous in terms of increased learning, behavior and open attitudes of staff and students. Everything a person does is a form of communication, either verbal or nonverbal. The way you walk, your facial expression, and even your silence are interpreted by others. As a principal you're always communicating, so my belief is that you might as well do it right.

Communication is a two-way process. It involves the process of being able to give and take. A principal must be able to effectively give as well as receive information. You must make sure that you understand the message and respond in a way that indicates the message was understood. It is very important for a principal to model effective communication using both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication (Murphy, 1992).

Justin Murphy (1992) suggests five guidelines for spoken communication that are vital for principals.

1. Express ideas clearly.
2. Use language effectively.
3. Incorporate carefully reasoned ideas and well-supported ideas.
4. Be flexible to listeners.
5. Set forth ideas in an effective and interesting manner.

Blase and Kirby (1992) feel it is of great importance for principals to be able to communicate high expectations with staff, students, and community. They further note that principals must also be consistent and repetitive with their behaviors in order to be effective and hold others' respect. Principals can communicate consistent high expectations in many forms. As a principal I would give pats on the back, notes with warm fuzzies, write monthly newsletters, develop quarterly calendars with important meeting dates, and make individual contacts with all staff members. It is not only important to have excellent verbal and nonverbal communication skills but to have the ability to write messages clearly and concisely at the level of the reader. I have learned how important written communication is in a school community. I believe effective written communication must be modeled by the principal and in turn it can be expected of the staff. I have no doubt that poorly written forms of communication are one way of losing credibility in a school community.

Vision

Sometimes when reading different articles I think the current emphasis on vision can be misleading. I've come to the conclusion that vision can blind leaders in a number of ways. I believe principals can be blinded by their own vision when they feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it. This does not serve as long term development. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) support this by saying:

My vision, my teachers, my school are proprietary claims and attitudes which suggest an ownership of the school that is personal rather than collective, imposed rather than earned, and hierarchical rather than democratic. With visions as singular as this, teachers soon learn to suppress their voice. It does not get articulated. Management becomes manipulation. Collaboration becomes cooptation. Worst of all, having teachers conform to the principals vision minimizes the possibilities for principle learning. It reduces the opportunities for principals to learn that parts of their vision may be flawed, and that some teachers' visions may be as valid or more valid than theirs. (p. 90)

I am not saying that a principal's vision is unimportant. I believe that the quality of that vision is what may have helped to prepare him/her for this leadership role. The point I'm stressing is that the principal is responsible for making vision building a collaborative exercise rather than manipulating people to believe in the principal's vision.

I hope that when I become an administrator I can develop a collaborative vision with my staff. I feel strongly about this because I have experienced that

things go well as long as everyone agrees with the administrator. I feel as if our school has a vision but it is missing one crucial element--faculty input and involvement. It has made me realize how important it is for all educators to have views that are listened to. I realize that a vision requires a process of give and take. Speaking from my experience, I know I'd feel more respected as a professional if time was taken to listen to my ideas as well as those of my peers.

Barth (1990) suggests that all educators need to have a personal view about the way we would like our schools to be. The school staff must all participate in sharing bits and pieces of their visions and reaching a consensus. Then they can all develop ownership in the vision they have collaboratively built. By working together the vision can happen and you don't mind the many challenges facing schools.

Joel Barker (1990) says that, "Vision is the result of dreams in action." I agree we acquire vision from our own experiences and values. I realize that I have been driven by vision for many years. It likely started at a young age from the many experiences I had with my father's administrative position. I knew when I started teaching that I was going to receive my Master's Degree in Administration. I have dreamed of being an elementary principal for many years. I value the job of a principal because I believe I can have an impact on the whole school instead of one classroom in the school. I value the principalship because I believe it is the best job in the school.

Conclusion

Green (1987), in describing the conscience of leadership, challenges us to identify and grasp the point of our profession. As a future principal, I feel the point of my profession is to see that all children are educated and nurtured through the building of self-esteem and personal worth. I believe this can be accomplished by a principal giving teachers opportunities to use their talents to improve life for children, welcoming teacher's participation, as well as criticism, and being secure enough in their own skills and competencies to realize that teachers have remarkable valuable insights and can make a vision work. As a teacher under these conditions, I would grow and be enthused about the power of vision. Teachers must be nurtured as reflective practitioners. This will give them the opportunity to make dreams happen.

I have asked myself many times why I want to be a principal. I believe that I have the ability to be a strong, effective principal who will remember vividly the life of an elementary classroom and what it is like. As a principal, I understand that leadership is not really a consequence of power but of communication and human relations skills. I believe a principal who is a leader works with teachers to develop their ideas and talents for the betterment of the children. I know that I can make a difference. The road will not always be easy, but I can get through the bumps. I believe in my abilities.

I have learned that building a shared vision is not an easy task. A lot of thought and reflection coupled with common sense approaches to the treatment of people helps a principal gain a sense of a desired future. The process takes willing principals and teachers who are confident in their beliefs about the purpose of

education. To complete the end product it takes a common vision shared by all, and a common determination to make the shared vision a reality.

Barth (1990) says that a vision is the daydream I have for how my school should be, my plan for making this happen, and the action of doing it. I agree and will add that I believe the difference between a dream and a vision is that vision is the essence of leadership. It is what that person believes should and can be. Every principal must have a vision that he/she truly believes in with their heart. In other words, an uncertain trumpet cannot be blown.

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