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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 our lives, we wear many different hats in the roles we perform. My first hat was one a student would wear to school. It was a colorful stocking hat which gave a hint to my personality and enthusiasm for learning and life. My outlook and values for education first began in the fall of 1965, when I as a youngster, walked down our farm driveway, waved good-bye to my mother and father, and boarded a big yellow school bus. It was indeed exciting. Little did I know how much education would affect my life. I will always be a life-long learner and am happy to have a career in the field of education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
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and Counseling
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Juli Mary Kwikkel

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Robert H. Decker

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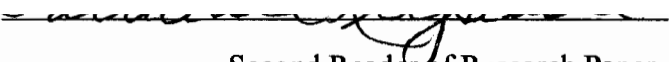
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Reflective Research Paper

Throughout our lives, we wear many different hats in the roles we perform. My first hat was one a student would wear to school. It was a colorful stocking hat which gave a hint to my personality and enthusiasm for learning and life.

My outlook and values for education first began in the fall of 1965, when I as a youngster, walked down our farm driveway, waved good-bye to my mother and father, and boarded a big yellow school bus. It was indeed exciting. Little did I know how much education would affect my life. I will always be a life-long learner and am happy to have a career in the field of education.

The paradigms I have about education were first cultivated during my years attending classes at a rural school. I had utmost respect for the staff who worked at the school and realize that all helped to make a positive learning environment. Students at my school were not forced to wear hats with tight elastic bands

under their chins nor did we wear dunce caps. We were encouraged to learn in our own learning style and to question our learning. I could tell that a true team effort was put forth to provide the best possible program for kids.

I had an elementary and junior high principal who was visible and involved with the students and staff. He was very approachable as well as accommodating, and I felt he had a good rapport with the people he worked with.

When I was young I decided I wanted to be a teacher, but never really thought I could be a principal because there were not many females wearing the hat of a principal. It was not until I began my teaching career that I observed several principals and the ways they handled their duties. I thought of the possibility of becoming a principal for a long time and finally decided to pursue it.

Principals have the opportunity to affect the lives of many more individuals in the school setting as opposed to a classroom teacher. No job is more important to the community than that of the school principal. I have heard it said many times that where you find outstanding schools, you will find outstanding

principals. From making sure students and teachers have the materials they need, to hiring teachers and advising parents, principals play a vital role in ensuring that every child gets the best possible education.

My vision of the principal's duties were somewhat limited until seven years ago when my husband became a secondary principal. I have watched him grow and become an effective elementary, middle school and secondary administrator. I am in a unique position in that my husband is my mentor in learning the ropes in regards to leading a group of educators and students in a positive direction. I have learned a lot about the processes and politics of administration. Administrative work is a rewarding experience with lots of decisions to be made, but the joys of the job far outweigh the sorrows.

I revisited the hatrack to find my student hats when I began the program to become a principal. Even though my student hats are worn, they still portray the colorful or "crayolaful" personality they had years before. The first course in the program entitled Introduction to Educational Administration gave me knowledge of how schools are governed, structured,

financed, and operated. It was very useful information to say the least. The many courses in the administrative program have helped me shape my personal values, beliefs, and vision. The interaction with the professors, other students and peers have given me valuable experiences and insights, as well as creating a network of support and information. The course design included more practical applications and applied learning rather than all theory and direct instruction. I have more confidence and am better prepared as a result of the training.

It has become very apparent that there are many entities which are going to have input into the educational processes for the future. These entities will have input because they will be the major sources in the utilization of the educated person. This ideological framework is about to come into its own very soon.

The school law course prepared me in regards to legal aspects of education. I gained some important advice dealing with legal questions while working as a principal: if you do not know the legalities of the issue, ask an expert who does! The sad truth is that

the word "negligence" has put educators into a quandary on procedures that make the schools reflect society.

Supervision and evaluation of instruction is an eye-opening course in which principals learn to look for the positive aspects in teaching and build on those things that will improve the education of our students. Good administrators will develop a shared vision so the staff will want to change to be more progressive and productive. Bennis and Nanus (1989) expressed that learners acquire and wear their vision like clothes. The walk it like they talk it. In an atmosphere like that, everyone involved in the learning process will come out winners.

As we learned in school law, the health of your institution is dependant on the reliability (good decision making skills) of its people. That reliability is built on your instructional leaders (principals) ability to evaluate and focus on the improvement of instructors. Garmston (1987) stated that teachers watch the walk more than they listen to the talk. Administrators who model their willingness to be observed and to receive feedback communicate two powerful messages to teachers: they value the coaching

process, and they are willing to risk their own vulnerability as they learn.

The courses I have taken in this program thus far have tickled the tines of my heartstrings because I have experienced many aspects that go hand in hand with the role of a principal. My instructors that I have been fortunate to have had in the Education Administration Program have provided insight and knowledge. They delivered this in a caring and student-centered fashion while encouraging us to think and evaluate our beliefs. Even with the extensive training and coursework, I know that I have a lot to learn regarding the principalship, and I'm not afraid to ask for help.

Recently, my observations have led me to realize that success in education will only come to those who are willing to collaborate with others in providing the best possible learning environment for our next generations. Today educational leaders are in the limelight as outsiders try to refocus the direction of education mainly through business terms. Only time will tell if education is meant to be run as a business or not.

Principals are the key leaders in the school. They should have a vision for education and be able to articulate that vision when policy, set by the board, is carried out. The school's mission should reflect the values guiding and controlling the behavior of the people within and associated with the school - administrators, teachers, professional support personnel, noncertified personnel, parents, and students. According to Johnston (1987) these values are:

not concrete-like policies, rules, budgets, or curriculum guides. Often, they are not even written down. But they are manifested in everything the school does because they guide the choices we make ...choices about content and method of teaching, choices about how we spend our (and our students') time, choices about whom we reward and what we reward them for. (p. 7)

Thus it is important for principals to know that successful schools have (1) clear and articulate missions, (2) leaders who devote a lot of attention to the shaping and dissemination of the mission, and (3) mission statements mutually agreed on and shared by everyone within the school.

Principals should promote autonomy in the buildings, but provide support when needed. I truly feel that a good principal should be a risk taker, be willing to invest their time, and treat people the way people should be treated.

Principal - Haberdasher

The principal in an instructional setting is a haberdasher of hats and dons different hats in the varied roles of the principal. The principal also encourages the staff to wear different hats in their roles as educators and not keep successes in education "under one's hat".

Throughout my coursework, I have identified many hats that the principal must wear in their educational career, but six of these are essential to effective leadership. They are taken off of the hat tree at different times and in diverse situations, but are necessary components to leading a school and its people. As Cunard (1990) stated that the school is charged with the single most important demand placed on any institution in this society: to develop the human capital necessary to compete with the rest of the world economy in the post-industrial society. The six roles and hats which portray each role are: instructional

leader, who wears a mortarboard; moral leader, bestowed with a biretta; a communicator, sporting a radio headset; a manager, with a hard hat; a change facilitator, fitted with a beanie; and a visionary, touting Merlin's colorful wizard hat. When charged with the duties accompanying the many roles of the principal, it is important to identify them, reflect on their importance, and share my motivation, beliefs, and hopes for the future.

Instructional Leader - Mortarboard

The mortarboard symbolizes knowledge and is worn as part of an academic costume. It is important for the instructional leader to "pass this hat" realizing that the role of instructional leader is present in empowered staff members and that the reins change hands frequently. An effective and successful administrator accomplishes the goals of the school by empowering others who in turn will take ownership in their schools. Sergiovanni (1987) proposes that active leadership is described as empowering others to be leaders. This empowerment requires the staff to be actively involved in the decision making. In doing so, the leader as well as the school will be successful.

I believe that each administrator develops their own style in terms of shared decision-making and empowerment. A word to the wise is for administrators to "not talk through one's hat" and have teachers spend a great deal of time and energy involved in a shared decision making process and then never use the recommendations. What would be worse would be to do exactly the opposite of the recommendations of the staff. Administrators must be up front with the staff and set the ground rules ahead of time, define roles and inform participants as to who will make the final decisions.

There are four major components of empowerment stated by Snow and Von Der Embse (1989). Significance is the first with teachers, students, and community sensing that they are making an important difference. The second component is competence which is involving continual learning and development. The third component is a sense of community in which people feel a belonging and joining of others for a common purpose. The fourth and final component is fun and enjoyment. When partakers like and enjoy what they are doing, challenge and excitement go hand in hand.

Empowerment and shared decision making need to start in the beginning with the development of the school's mission and belief statements. Barth (1988) stated that a school can fulfill no higher purpose than to teach its members that if they strongly believe, they can make anything happen. I truly believe in this premise. When we "pass the hat" in leadership, we all get to wear the mortarboard.

The NAESP (1991) recognizes the value of a school mission statement, and sets standards of excellence in the leadership role for principals. It is stated in the Standards that principal's values, beliefs, and personal characteristics inspire people to accomplish the school's mission. It further states that the principal demonstrates:

1. vision
2. a sense of humor
3. self-confidence
4. enthusiasm
5. optimism
6. initiative
7. respect and consideration for others
8. recognition and appreciation of the accomplishments of others

9. a high energy quotient
10. innovativeness
11. intellectual curiosity and reflective thinking
12. high expectations for quality performance

These are qualities inherent in an instructional leader who realizes that shared decision-making is a first cousin to shared leadership.

There are many intricacies woven into the mosaic hat of an instructional leader. It is important to remember that an administrator is working for and with people, not just bricks, mortar and a set of educational plans. In a 1965 message to Congress, Lyndon B. Johnson stated that "the three R's of our school system must be supported by the three T's - teachers who are superior, techniques of instruction that are modern, and thinking about education which places it first in all our plans and hopes." (1965)

The principal as an instructional leader is charged with responsibilities in a vast array of areas such as the ones cited by Johnson.(1965) These areas include curriculum, instruction, staff development and supervision and evaluation of teacher and student performance. Our coursework emphasized each of these areas as emphasizing the importance of cultivating a

vision, and reflecting on that vision in accordance with the days activities.

The role of instructional leader is a very important one. John F. Kennedy once stated in an address to Congress that a child miseducated is a child lost. (1962) Deal (1993) encourages instructional leaders to remember that every child is a promise and we owe our children the best education possible.

Communicator - Radio Headset

I enjoy listening to talk shows on the radio and am amazed by the answers the commentators share at the "drop of a hat." The commentator must develop the art of listening intently so as to provide the listener with a response that will be beneficial to the audience, thus oral communication involves the skill of listening and talking.

The skill of good communication whether nonverbal, verbal, or written is an important skill for educational leaders. Communicators give or interchange thoughts and information by writing or speaking. Communication means that a message not only was sent but also received and responded to in a way indicating that it was understood. Ubben and Hughes (1987)

proposed five questions which administrators can utilize to assess their communication techniques:

- (a) If the message was received, was it read [heard]?
- (b) If it was read [heard], was it understood?
- (c) If it was understood, was it understood in the right spirit?
- (d) If it was understood in the right spirit, will it be acted on in a positive manner?
- (e) How do you know?

The principal may sport different hats depending on which individual or group she/he is communicating to or with, whether it be an elementary teacher, a group of students in the lunchroom, or a parent advisory council. It is important that the principal model and demonstrate effective communication. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (1991) highlight communication practices and suggest that the principal must have the ability to: (a) write messages clearly and concisely for their intended audiences; (b) utilize fact and data and determine their value in communication; (c) use current technology to communicate; and (d) demonstrate skills in nonverbal communication. With regard to nonverbal communication,

it was stated by Engler (1988) that whether we are aware of it or not, we are always communicating. Even when we do not speak words, we are communicating through the use of nonverbal communication. We use body language such as proximity, posture, gesture, and facial expression as powerful forms of nonverbal communication. We must be aware of nonverbal communication in ourselves and others to be effective.

As a principal I need to remember that positive praise should be "frequently felt" and not become "old hat." There is nothing more uplifting than a genuine compliment. It becomes contagious and is a plus when emulated by teachers and students alike. Positive praise can be disseminated through oral and/or written communication. It can take the form of a newsletter column entitled "Hat's Off to You", or can be shared orally at a teacher's meeting or student assembly. It doesn't cost anything but gives rewards of high value and is truly part of an effective school.

Moral Leader - Biretta

It is my belief that we have a moral obligation to our profession and to the children we serve in that we are helping to mold our future generations. This is quite a task and at times can be compared to the

pontiff and the symbol of the biretta worn by clergy. Horace Mann once said that "man is stone but children are wax" (1845).

The profession of an educational leader warrants conscience actions (Green,1987). He stated that the need for education is more ubiquitous. Perhaps because education is omnipresent and received in a vast array of ways for many people, it and its professionalism is not taken as seriously as the field of medicine or law. It does, however, respond to central human needs, which provide the foundation for the ethics of educational practice.

It is important for educational leaders to have a clear vision and understanding of what it means to educate. If an educator has a clear image of its practice, then the ethics of education will be attained and raised.

There are many ways the point of the professional enterprise shapes our conscience which in essence is our capacity to criticize our own practice and that of others. Taking the time daily to reflect on where we were, where we are, and where we are going are of utmost importance.

Green (1987) spoke of inner "voices" which help us to reflect and chart the course for our next action. How many times do we truly stop to listen to our "voices" within, or are we too busy getting caught up listening to the "static" of outside voices? It seems to me that if people would only stop to ponder one's intent, they may be surprised and enlightened. I seem to ponder more as I get older. I still taste "shoe leather" once in awhile, but am aware that the voices are there, past experiences are helpful, and there is importance in being a moral leader.

Green (1987) described voices of craft, membership, duty, memory, and imagination which all play their tunes on our souls. All play integral parts of our profession. Some voices have stronger tunes and rhythms at times.

Craft is to be skillful in matters of leadership, but that does not necessarily make it a "first cousin" to ethics or morals. Having one without the other could be dangerous.

Loyalty is a synonym for the conscience of membership. If one is a member of a certain group, ties of social norms accompany the member. Social norms are the rules the conscience plays by, and they

may be very public, especially in education. The educational leader must have the scales balance with regard to membership in various groups.

Sacrifice voices often are associated with morality. It is the voice of our sense of duty playing against our own self-interest. Many times the self-interest voice is a soprano and the duty voice is a bass.

It would be interesting to create a new school with interested parties not having any social memories or paradigms on how a school should be. This is impossible according to Green (1987) because none of our consciences are blank slates.

If we are embarking on the career of being a principal for perceived power, high position, or status we think the job possesses, we are in for a rude awakening and have sorely missed the mark. Self-centered thinking such as this breeds a crisis in our consciousness.

Our desire to be a principal or instructional leader of a school should be practiced in response to some fundamental human need or social good whose advancement is already a moral aim, not one of simply

exuding power and collecting a paycheck at the end of the month.

As part of our training, our instructors are helping to give us a command of relevant expertise as well as the point of why we should want to be principals, which is coupled with instruction in professional ethics. We will be inept in all areas of the profession, not just in the area of craft, if we do not begin to listen to the voices of conscience in our hearts as we strive to be educational professional leaders in the next century.

Manager - Hard Hat

Many administrators do not refer to themselves as managers but as leaders which seems to carry with it a more attractive appeal. Administrators do manage, however, because in a school situation, different people and resources are brought together in one location such as the case of a school building or district. With this configuration there is a need for someone to organize, schedule, and coordinate the entire operation.

As managers, school administrators are expected to procure, organize, and coordinate both physical and human resources so that the goals of the organization

can be attained effectively (Snyder, 1988). A well-run school lays the foundation for instructional leadership.

When you look at the physical aspects of a building there are many considerations that become a challenge. They may be in the form of room and space considerations, to the upkeep and maintenance of all physical features. I also believe that a lot of school personnel, unless trained, may be put in maintenance situations that put you at the mercy of "experts."

I witnessed this first hand when building alterations and new construction took place in my current district. There are always plenty of ideas but not much knowledge about the right way to go about changes.

I do believe that your physical plant appearance is very crucial to your educational philosophy. Well lit, neatly decorated rooms with good ventilated space both in heating and cooling give you one less factor to worry about in student performance. Schools that carry the war surplus lime green and yellow walls tend to make you wonder what the direction the district takes when looking at the whole picture.

The best I can do with my hard hat in the role of a manager is to ask questions of people with knowledge about a concern, look at what others in my area have done, seek advice, sort out all the information with the budget at hand, utilize available technology and do the best I can to enable me to make good decisions about the most effective way to manage.

Change Facilitator - Beanie

The hat the principal wears as a facilitator of change is the multicolored beanie. I chose this analogy because with vast changes present in our society, we are a multicolored society with multifaceted problems and we must be prepared for rapid changes to occur. To become effective educational leaders, we must understand the change process, examine the reasons behind the change, and direct it purposefully.

I heard someone jokingly say that the only people who do not resist change are wet babies. While I have to laugh at this statement, I feel that it is hauntingly true. I know that in my teaching career there have been drastic changes in all aspects of the school and the children who attend and not all of these have been welcome or comfortable.

One of the first assignments in my coursework was to read an article by Harold Hodgkinson. In it he compared our educational system to a house that was once beautiful and well maintained, but over time, the owners allowed the house to deteriorate. Even though repairs were made in the house, the roof continued to leak causing further demise to the structure. The leaky roof is a metaphor for the changes that have occurred in the nature of the children who come to school. Hodgkinson (1991) cited changes in the family structure and that only 6% of today's families are considered to be traditional where the father works and the mother is a homemaker. On any given night, between 50,000 and 200,000 children have no home. The number of single females heading families has increased by 35% in the last 10 years. There are fewer households with children living at home, thus the support base for educational program has a tendency to decrease. The facts do not paint a beautiful picture.

Educators can not fix the roof all by themselves. It will require the efforts of many people and organizations. Partnerships must be formed between health and social welfare agencies, parents, business and political leaders. It will take tremendous effort

by all parties. As Deal (1993) stated, "The only opportunity you have is the ability to make sense of the opportunities presented to you." As educators it is our responsibility to develop schools which prepare our students for the world they live in. They need skills to think critically, solve real-world problems, use technology, and communicate in a way that they can be understood.

The main thing for me to remember is that change does not happen overnight. It takes time. All people change at different rates and at different times. In our effort to improve schools we need to remember that we do not change for the sake of change. There needs to be reasons for the change. Information needs to be gathered before one "tosses their hat in the ring."

Visionary - Merlin's Hat

When I think of Merlin the wizard from the literature of King Arthur's days, I recall him prophesying the future of the people living in the kingdom. As principals we need to cultivate our vision to be effective educational leaders. We need to wear and feel our vision like a hat for all to see. This personal vision provides a framework within which we can make use of the many prescriptions and conceptions

of others as stated by Barth (1990). He also stressed that the school should be a community of learners. Everyone is learning at the same time, not just the students. In this fashion, all participants are part of the vision for the schools to thrive and educate in the best fashion.

I envision a school where people want to go and be a part of. It is an inviting place where students and teachers are encouraged to try new things and quench their thirst for learning. It is a place where relationships are collegial and cooperative and where all people work together. Diversities are welcome and celebrated in this school and are an integral part of everyday life.

I have begun to really think about why I am an educator since beginning this coursework. The importance of reflection and developing a vision for education has been stressed time and time again. These words have taken on new meanings for me. To educate another and oneself is not just going through the motions, it is much deeper than that. I heard this said a few years back and it is important to me. "We have but two educations, one we give ourselves, and one we give to others" (Lowell, 1931).

Mamary (1993) stressed that we ask ourselves these questions when defining and refining our vision.

- (a) What do we want to do?
- (b) Where are we now?
- (c) Where do we want to go?
- (d) How are we going to get there?

These questions have become part of my daily life, especially when I take "mini-sabbaticals" as described by Barth (1990). These questions provide me with a reference point to begin anew.

Schools can be a place for philosophers and humorists. It is important to continually question and make necessary revisions, while laughing at the funny things that occur daily. I am living proof that humor has improved my quality of life and as a principal I am sure that I will laugh and cry at the same time. Humor is strongly associated with learning. When sprinkled together it makes life interesting.

I welcome the idea that everyone should have a chance to be a leader in a good school. Barth (1990) suggests to, "make what you believe in happen." My job now is to encourage others to adopt a visionary attitude, by making what they believe in happen, and to contribute to and benefit from the leadership of

others. As Joel Barker (1990) stated in one of his videos, "Vision is the result of dreams in action." I have a vision of a good school and will draw upon it to provide concrete help, guidance and encouragement to others. It will guide me as I strive to build a school with a community of learners and leaders which have tremendous value in the world we live in today. In summation, Barth (1990) stated that when we create schools that we value, for our children and for ourselves, we will have created schools of value to others as well.

Conclusion

With the changes in society come increased pressures on instructional leaders to demonstrate that they can meet the challenges of the 21st century. Dr. Doud shared with our class characteristics of effective principals which provide aspiring leaders springboards of thought. (July, 1993)

They have a sense of vision about where school is today and where it can go tomorrow. Effective principals have the ability to provide leadership for the development and implementation of clear and precise instructional goals as well as establishing and maintaining a healthy learning environment which is

free from disruption. They have the ability to secure and allocate resources in ways that support appropriate staff and student behavior while being committed to quality and a willingness to set high standards and expectations for teachers and students and they possess confidence in their ability to take action and influence situations.

This appears to be a "ten-gallon hat" order for what a principal should be. As I stated previously, I have a great deal to learn and I am not too proud to ask for help. It is a risk but as I heard stated once, the biggest risk in education is not taking any!

This quote from Lois Roets (personal communication, August 9, 1992), gives me inspiration every time I read it. I truly feel that we, as educators have a wonderful opportunity to make the world a better place. With that in mind, I will continue to help others choose and wear their hats with pride and to the best of their abilities.

Educators:

Ours is a great profession.

We are the
molders of minds
and
sharers of dreams.

And
in the process,
we, also, are changed.

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