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The values, beliefs, and vision of an education administrator: A reflective essay

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The values, beliefs, and vision of an education administrator: A reflective essay

Abstract

I cannot always see where I am headed, but surely I can look back and see where I have been. The following essay is a reflection of this statement and my experience as a student in the Department of Education Administration and Counseling. I will analytically look at where I have been and synthesize a vision of where I am headed. Ideally I want this essay to meet the requirements of this program, and then go a step further and create a foundation that will aid my entry into the field of secondary administration.

The Values, Beliefs, and Vision of An Education Administrator:

A Reflective Essay

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Education Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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by

John P. Trainor

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I cannot always see where I am headed, but surely I can look back and see where I have been. The following essay is a reflection of this statement and my experience as a student in the Department of Education Administration and Counseling. I will analytically look at where I have been and synthesize a vision of where I am headed. Ideally I want this essay to meet the requirements of this program, and then go a step further and create a foundation that will aid my entry into the field of secondary administration.

Various resources were used to support my values, beliefs, and vision. My research of these resources provided information that is used in the essay. Professional views cited from these resources are carefully selected examples of my values and beliefs and these professional views, along with my values and beliefs, are a product of my personal characteristics. I want to clarify this last statement by noting that in the following pages of this essay I identify and describe some of my personal characteristics, because it is essential to know what drives my values and beliefs. My values and beliefs are important because they are what drive my vision. The resources used and information gathered from classes taken at Shindelar Education Center are the only administrative background that I have had and they, too, drive my vision. My formal

administrative experience and the informal experience gained from developing my values and beliefs have been metaphorically described as parts of a car. They work together and drive me (the car) as I travel down the "education road." It will be a trip that I will learn from both as an administrator and a person. This essay is the travel itinerary I will use as I make this trip.

The conclusion of my essay will try to predict the future of that trip by synthesizing a vision. Hopefully this vision will identify a plan that will begin with the first few weeks on the job and culminate with preparation for the first day of school. It should construct a view of how to create a positive effect on school programs and at the same time discuss ideas that will help professional relationships grow and look at ways to provide opportunity for successful student outcomes. My vision will not discuss the many issues that will be part of the school year itself, because I believe it is difficult to predict what issues might arise for me as an administrator. Instead, I have included analysis of some issues using my experience as a teacher and focused the vision on describing how good preparation will help minimize problems associated with the school year. This paper will "mirror" my values, beliefs, and vision because I want to see where I have been so I can better understand where I am headed.

Personal Characteristics

What personal characteristics do I possess that qualify me as a principal candidate? What vision do I need to become an effective principal? I have been trying to answer these two questions for the better part of five years. To understand the nature of myself, I have to discuss my views about education, children, organization of the school, and a school's purpose in the community. Love for learning is a personal quality that I possess and because of that I know that I will miss interacting with children as a facilitator of their learning. I am a sponge for knowledge and believe it is at the base of my interest in education. As a principal I do not want to just evaluate and supervise teachers. Instead I want to continue to be an integral part of the instructional process. My purpose will not change, only my role will. Therefore, I personally and professionally believe a principal should be an instructional leader. Fallon and Weldy's (1979) Point/Counterpoint articles addressed the issue of a principal as an instructional leader. I agree with Weldy when he counterpoints Fallon's thesis that principal's are only evaluators and supervisors. He stated,

The chief error in Professor Fallon's position is that instructional leadership consists solely of observing and evaluating classroom

teaching. This perception of what is instructional leadership by principals (or whoever else) is unfortunately a most narrow and inadequate one. (Weldy, p. 72)

As the article progressed, Weldy identified the principal as a leader of in-service training, curriculum development, scheduler, and allocator of resources. These responsibilities suggest that a principal by the nature of his position inherits the role of instructional leader. This leadership should make the school an environment for acquiring knowledge and provide a common sense approach to learning, and that in effect can lead to solving real-life problems.

An experience I had with a student this year sums up this last statement. Jessica was a student in my American Government class who came to me for some advice. She thought that because I was a government teacher that I could best help her with a problem. She said that each day her friends visited in the hallway before first hour class. An administrator asked them to move to another area of the building because they were blocking the hallway. I told Jessica, "That sounds reasonable." She nodded in agreement and further explained that her friends complied with the administrator's request and took their conversation down to the cafeteria. The students had been gathering in the cafeteria for a couple

of weeks when one day the administrator walked by and told them that they should move to another area of the building. Showing frustration and anger, she asked me if I thought that what the administrator had done was a violation of student rights. Jessica had obviously remembered a unit that we just finished on civil rights that included examples and discussion of student rights. I looked at her and asked, "Do you think what he did was wrong?" She looked puzzled and even more frustrated because my question back to her was not what she wanted from me. She wanted me to solve the problem. I recognized that and proceeded to review with her some of the things we had learned in American Government class about student rights, the responsibilities of an administrator, and how to solve problems in a civilized manner. I roleplayed with her by explaining that if she approached the administrator the same way she had approached me, that she would not get the results she sought. I then told her to use knowledge acquired in class by writing him a letter asking for a meeting and then carefully and tactfully explain to him why she felt that her friends had been unfairly treated. A few days later she came to see me. She was very upbeat and told me that everything I had explained to her had worked and that the administrator agreed that her friends had complied with his request to go to another

area of the building. She said he apologized and told her they could continue meeting in the cafeteria before school. She thanked me for helping, but I interceded that it was not me who helped her as much as the education she acquired. She nodded matter-of-factly and left. I hope that over time she will understand what took place.

This is an example that education can cure problems. An experience like this will help guide me as an administrator, but realism will guide me as an effective administrator. Also, this example lends support to the personal characteristic that I enjoy interacting with children and in turn many experiences like this will help develop my vision, purpose, and ultimate sense of direction.

I am an organized person who gets things done and believe I can find an answer to a problem and I am not afraid to solve that problem. I do not always succeed, but I do always try. Organization skills lead to a characteristic that I like best about myself and that is I love a good challenge and look at a problem as an unsolved opportunity. I am a positive person who is motivated by challenge, and believe in the ultimate good of people and think that everyone has something to offer. Fear of failure is not a concern as long as I am satisfied that I followed my administrative plan. Lipharn and Hoegh (1974) stated,

Values serve as a perceptual screen for the decision maker, affecting both his awareness of the problematic state of a system and his screening of information relative to the problem.

Second, values condition the screening of possible alternatives. . . .

Finally, values serve as the criteria against what higher-order goals are assessed and projected. (P. 158)

I agree. In essence, my personal characteristics are a result of my values and beliefs, and guide my decision making and ultimately the direction that I take my role as a facilitator.

A sense of community can be a personal characteristic. I have that trait and see education as a group-centered endeavor. My experience in this graduate program caused me to become more aware of the untapped community resources available to a facilitator of learning. When creating goals and objectives for my attendance center, I plan to involve parents, students, teachers, central office staff, and members of the community. I want their input. It is important that I involve them in the process so that I can learn from other peoples perspectives, people who can give me honest feedback on the needs of a school. Each community group has something to offer. It is important that I listen and that I am willing to include their ideas in the decision making process. My thinking is

supported by Sumption and Engstrom (1966) when they stated, " There must be a structured, systematic, and active participation on the part of the people of a community in the educational planning, policy making, problem solving, and evaluation of the school" (P. xi.). A sense of community can help to deliver these human resources and citizen involvement can assure a better understanding of what our education needs are for children now and in the future. Democratic relationships can only lead to more ideas and more support of the education system within the community. Yet, I am a realist who is not void of skepticism. Democratization of the decision making process in the development of school objectives can lead to cumbersome decision making, but that is necessary if I am to rid the community of a possible lack of efficacy toward education. A democratic approach that is learning-centered, student-centered, organized, positive, and challenging is an acceptable approach, and community teamwork is a chance I am willing to take as a school administrator.

Analysis of Issues

As a teacher over the last two decades, I have seen things that changed the school environment. Some of these changes have been positive and some have not. Changes have occurred in discipline,

curriculum, communication, teaching methods, and a host of other education related areas. Some of these changes that reflect major issues in regard to administration are discipline, curriculum, budget, administrator-faculty relations, time allocation by administrators, and school and community relations. This is not an all-inclusive list. Instead it is a list of issues that I am concerned with that may interact with other issues that I have identified or issues not mentioned here.

According to Bartosh and Bartelli (1985) discipline is the number one frustration of school administrator's. They suggested that time is very important in handling discipline problems and that an administrator must deliver a lesson here just as he or she would expect a teacher to deliver a lesson in the classroom. I believe that discipline can be affected by community involvement and curriculum. It is an accepted view by myself that children who are not challenged or as they might say "I have nothing to do" may be students who could become a discipline problem. The problem may not be self-generated but instead a product of a curriculum that does not challenge them and a community that lacks efficacy toward education. In the text The School and Community Relations it stated, "To address the perception of discipline, a program that involves parents, students, and staff should be developed to build a clear code. There are

many examples of strong discipline policies being supported and even cheered by parents and communities" (Kindred, Bagin, & Gallagher, 1984, p. 4). As mentioned earlier in this paper, democratization of the education process can be cumbersome, but it is necessary to aid student growth in education. This issue suggests a need to use a well known democratic principle called compromise. If there is fault in the lack of discipline, it is a shared fault on the part of student, curriculum, and community. The task at hand would be to synthesize a plan that would bring together the student, curriculum leaders (teachers), and the community (i.e., parents) and remediate the issue of discipline by focusing on how to make the curriculum more challenging and at the same time creating a sense of efficacy in the community by getting the community to be a responsible partner that has a direct role in solving this problem. This approach toward improving student discipline would be efficient, too, because you would be attacking three problems in education at the same time.

The budget is a problem with no simple solution. According to Kindred (1984) the United States outspends European nations two to one in education, and four to one when compared to Russia and the Federation of Independent States. So, what is the concern? I suspect it

is a combination of things that include an awareness toward needs in technology, a public attitude that has developed about teacher salaries, school buildings that are outdated and unsafe, and the general costs of living that has create a high per capita income in the United States. The budget is the largest allocation of money taken from state budgets to pay for a tax-based service. In Iowa, it is the first piece of business the legislature must address at the beginning of each session of the General Assembly. The budget unfortunately is tailored around student enrollment rather than the different needs of school districts. For example, if a district needs a new building because the old one has outlasted its usefulness and at the same time that district's enrollment decreases, then the loss of student dollars means potentially a loss in the tax base and a real question arises on whether a new building should be added in a district that has declining enrollment.

My analysis of issues is built on preconceived views. Originality as an administrator rests more with what I have learned from others rather than what I created on my own. My ideas about the best budget process are ones that I already have seen and liked. The budget process that I believe works best is a combination centralized-decentralized budget in which the superintendent determines the initial process through the

central office and then gives each administrator a chance to present a case for raising his or her allocation to accommodate some important project. The advantage here is that this process is fair and just to all attendance centers while providing for additional financial support to a building that can demonstrate a need.

One of the topics that affect faculty and administrator relations is the evaluation process. Effective teaching is an issue that must be addressed by a secondary administrator because it is he or she who usually has the last say in recommending appointment or dismissal of teachers, and therefore should have, as an instructional leader, a plan or model of what constitutes an effective teacher. Brandt's (1986) conversation with David Berliner on effective teaching would be good ground to cover before starting the evaluation process. Berliner's response to the following question by Brandt supports, in part, my personal experience in teacher growth, and at the same time is something to consider when evaluating tenured teachers. An evaluation of my experience will follow this quote. Brandt states, "It seems that some of the things you mentioned (on expert teaching) might be matters of experience rather than real expertise" (Brandt, p. 7). Berliner responded by saying,

We don't know yet how to carve out experience from expertise.

We're quite sure that a person with many years experience is not necessarily an expert, but all of our experts have ten years or so experience. In other words, experience is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being an expert. (Brandt, 1986, p.7)

I could try to cite all the needs of an instructional leader when determining the effectiveness of a potential teacher and a tenured teacher, but instead I will limit my discussion to identifying criteria that an administrator should look for in the evaluation process, and methods of remediation that are clearly focused on a positive approach to retaining a teacher. Over the past two decades I have been evaluated many times by administrators. As time went by and I gained experience as a teacher, I became more comfortable when an administrator entered my room for an evaluation. So, I do agree with Berliner that experience is an aid to the professional growth of a teacher. Experience gave me confidence, and when it came time for a evaluation conference I learned to listen to what the administrator had to say about me rather than be relieved that everything concerning my evaluation was just about done for the year. Unlike some of the stories told to me by colleagues, I was always evaluated by someone who also observed and supervised me prior to the evaluation.

There were teachers that my colleagues knew of that were subpar teachers, yet year after year they received a new contract. Gorton (1983) ably identified this problem in School Administration and Supervision when he stated,

Staff evaluation without supervision can lead to anxiety, frustration, and resistance on the part of the recipient to the evaluation. The individual or group may have been informed through evaluation about certain areas which need to be improved but, in the absence of appropriate follow-up supervision, may not be able to remedy the deficiencies. (P. 238)

I agree with what Gorton said and believe this is a problem when evaluating teachers. For some reason there is a group out there who is afraid to send subpar teachers through the remediation process and the likely reasons are because of inadequate documentation of evaluations for the teacher and/or lack of qualifications and time for the remediation process by the administrator. Empowerment of teachers should be a footnote to the topic of evaluation and supervision. A principal's job in this area is not just to hire and fire employees. That may only make him an efficient administrator. He must show effectiveness as a supervisor by encouraging teachers to implement ideas that will improve the

education process. DeFour and Eaker (1979) cited teacher empowerment as part of the evaluation and supervision process when they stated,

Teachers should be encouraged to expand their repertoire and attempt to develop new skills. Principals should discourage teaching behaviors that are contrary to the findings of the research on effective teaching. However, it is the substance--the results--of teaching that principals should concern themselves with rather than the style. Responsibility for day-to-day instructional decisions should remain with the teacher. (P. 86)

This positive approach to school improvement may be an overlooked part of the evaluation process.

Time is a commodity that governs administrators and according to Dr. James Albrecht (Personal communication, Fall 1991), "Time is unique and totally inelastic in that no matter how great the demand there is no more supply." Therefore time is a function of the administrative experience that forces an administrator to prioritize objectives because of its scarcity. Albrecht takes his discussion to another level when he says, "When we study our own record of time expenditure, we can learn the difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Efficiency is problem

oriented, whereas effectiveness is product oriented, the end result. We can be the most efficient paper shufflers in the history of bureaucracy and not be effective administrators. (Albrecht, Personal communication)

Gorton (1983) stated,

As a manager, the school administrator is expected to procure, organize, and coordinate both human and physical resources so that the goals of the organization can be attained effectively. Her main role is to develop or implement policies and procedures which will result in the efficient operation of the school. (P. 72)

I see a need as an administrator to balance these two organization skills to get the best results from what time is available. Albrecht suggests following Alec MacKenzie's guidelines in Imperatives of Time Management. MacKenzie, a former staff member of the American Management Association and president of the Institute for Leadership, Inc., in Chappaqua, New York, suggested six steps for being more efficient and effective as a manager of time. He suggests that an efficient and effective manager needs to set objectives, determine the priority for those objectives, continue to inventory your time to see where it goes, minimize time wasters, maximize time savers, and manage for the primary goals---results. Gorton and Albrecht differ in their statements,

because Gorton is talking about administrators whereas Albrecht is quoting an expert on managers. They are alike in that both of them used three key words, efficient, effective, and manager in their statements, and that suggests the administrator should be an efficient and effective manager of his or her attendance center.

Is it necessary to develop community support for education? I emphatically answer that question with a yes! The following guiding principle comes from Robert Houser (1990), Chairperson of the Iowa Initiative for World-Class Schools Task Force.

Schools must assist parents in assuming their full role as partners in educating their children. Schools don't exist in a vacuum. Parents are a child's first teacher and should be involved in meaningful ways in educating their children. Schools must be responsible for seeking that involvement. (P. 5)

The implication of this guiding principle is that schools and school leaders must assume the role of involving parents in the child's education. I believe the statement goes one more step in that it also implies that schools must involve the community as a partner in the child's education. This analysis is supported by Kindred (1984) who stated,

Schools that communicate with their external publics in some

organized way enhance their chances of getting better public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of a community, and receiving many functional ideas that will help them educate students better. (P. 126)

Fusing together the statement from the Iowa Initiative for World-Class Schools Task Force with this statement by Kindred I see a need for schools to get parents and community to assist in the educational development of students by becoming partners in education. A plan could be devised that would create a "triangle of assistance", between the school, parents, and community, and hopefully remove that lack of educational efficacy that plagues so many districts. The words "I won't make a difference anyway" need to be replaced with "What can I do to help." It is the role of the administrator to see that parents and community receive the message that they are an integral part of a student's success in school.

The preceding part of this essay has looked at where I have been, and now it is time to envision the more difficult task of where I am headed.

Synthesis of My Vision

Early on I said that this essay would become a travel itinerary for my trip as an educational administrator. Excitement in hoped for in the

perceived expectations, especially if the trip takes me to a place I have not traveled to before. In a real trip a person does not know what to expect until he or she gets to the final destination, but plans are put together ahead of time with priorities established about where to go and what to see when that person gets there. Planning is what hopefully will make the trip enjoyable. I see this vision and future administrative experiences in that way. There is excitement in my perceived expectations, but I must plan out where I want to go and what I want to see if it is to be a rewarding experience. The following is my administrative plan of where I want to go and what I want to see when I get there.

It is August 1, 1995, and I am on the job for my first day of work as a high school administrator. What should I do first? Should I take a deep breath and pray or just go forward with a plan. I will probably pray first and then go forward with a plan. I plan to make my first few weeks a learning experience in that I will assess the needs of my new district by orienting myself with things that are already in place. Gorton (1983) is helpful when he stated,

The new administrator should attempt to secure and thoroughly read student and teacher handbooks, and copies of the student

newspaper. A careful examination should also be made of the school board policies, district office manual of procedures, and the district's master contract, if they exist. All of this information should contribute to the process of familiarizing the new administrator with current school and district problems, policies, and procedures. (P. 505)

In following this advice, I would go one step further and schedule meetings with other administrative staff, ask to meet with instructional staff such as department heads, and support staff such as cooks, secretaries, and custodians with the purpose in mind of learning about their responsibilities and explaining to them what are my responsibilities. In preparation for these meetings I am also going to review Developmental Dimensions International's Keys to Meeting Leadership (1988) because I think it has good information on how to prepare for, conduct, and follow-up a meeting. Additionally, I will keep nearby a copy of Sergiovanni's Ten Principles for Quality Leadership (1982), because I believe it is a good review for implementing first-time improvements and a good guide for effectively and efficiently handling everyday tasks. I will take time to learn about my new district's discipline policy, assess the curriculum, and review the budget, because these are three issues that I

must develop an attitude about before I have "get acquainted meetings" with the faculty and community.

Time allocation will be important because August will be a busy month for me as I try to effectively and efficiently familiarize myself with the new school district. Visibility will be important so people can take the time to get accustomed to me before the first day of school. A letter would be sent to all staff welcoming them into the building for a short chat. The letter would let them know that I am the new high school principal and included in it would be information about my Summer of preparation and my hopes for the new school year.

As mentioned earlier in this essay the issues that I have addressed are not an all-inclusive list but instead a general list of areas that I need to learn about. Also, mentioned earlier in this essay was the idea that I am not original because most of my creative thought comes from what I have learned from others. Gorton offers some good advice when he outlines three priority areas for a new administrator. He says that a new administrator should concentrate on "obtaining a good understanding of all aspects of the educational program and the context in which the school operates, developing a good interpersonal relationship with other people, and attaining a well-organized and smoothly operating school" (Gorton,

1990, p.509). I have heeded his advice because I have addressed, at least in part, these three priorities in my vision of how to prepare for the coming school year.

I have acquired a list of priorities for opening the school year from Waverly-Shell Rock High School. I like the list because it is organized to the point of being efficient and I have seen it work effectively. It is a checklist that is general enough in its application that adjustments could be made it to accommodate any size of school. Having good organization skills was listed as one of my personal characteristics and I believe I will be prepared for the start of the school year. Another personal trait is that I love to learn. I mentioned that I am a sponge for knowledge and because of that I will listen to people and learn. I will use materials that will efficiently and effectively guide me and carefully select them based on prior experience of what works and what doesn't. Knowledge gained and materials acquired during my graduate experience will be the foundation that helps drive me my first year.

Finally, the most important part of this whole sequence is preparing for the students. But this is a statement after the fact, because that is what I have been doing throughout this entire paper. The student has been at the forefront of my thinking the whole time I was developing and

articulating ideas for this essay. It makes me smile when I think that the one course in my graduate experience that I privately complained to myself about, because I had taken it as an undergraduate, was Psychology of Adolescence. I completed this coursework toward the end of my graduate program and it was worthwhile in that it helped me review things that will aid me as I work with instructional and support staff in promoting healthy student outcomes

What are my goals for the first year? In an professional sense I want to strive for success with Gorton's three priorities and become good at administrative tasks by modeling myself as an effective and efficient administrator, and I want to be positive in my approach to what should become an enjoyable learning experience. I know where I have been and I am looking forward to where I am headed. Now I need to make sure that I always have a full tank of gas!

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