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A vision of leadership : a reflective essay

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A vision of leadership : a reflective essay

Abstract

My interest in the field of education was sparked before I entered kindergarten. My mom was a teacher and I had two high school-aged siblings planning to enter the educational field. These three individuals greatly influenced my desire to enter the educational profession. By the age of eight, I had decided that I was going to make a difference in the lives of children and to right all of the wrongs that I had heard about from various family conversations. My maturity and experiences have allowed me to reflect upon the roles of leadership.

A VISION OF LEADERSHIP: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership,
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by

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My interest in the field of education was sparked before I entered kindergarten. Several extended family members were in the teaching profession. However, my mom was a teacher and I had two high school-aged siblings planning to enter the educational field. These three individuals greatly influenced my desire to enter the educational profession.

Over the last 25 years many family gatherings have included discussions about education. Heated or calm, the topics have always fascinated me, even when I have not been able to understand the depth of the discussion. As I have grown older and have begun to participate, my knowledge and understanding of the profession have expanded greatly. It has been through these family debates that I made the decision to not only be the best teacher that I could possibly be, but to also be a leader in the field of education. By the age of eight, I had decided that I was going to make a difference in the lives of children and to right all of the wrongs that I had heard about from various family conversations. My maturity and experiences have allowed me to reflect upon the roles of leadership,

associated qualities, and responsibilities in education as-well-as in other professions and organizations. In the book Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul (1996), Oprah Winfrey discusses a commencement speech she gave to the 1993 graduates of Spelman College, she said, "Dare to be different. Be a pioneer. Be a leader. Be the kind of woman who in the face of adversity will continue to embrace life and walk fearlessly toward the challenge (p. 54)".

My objectives upon enrolling in this program were to gain knowledge, develop skills, increase my vision, broaden my experiences, and realize my place pertaining to leadership and education. Since taking the introductory class I have grown and developed as a leader through the guidance of the professors, the program curriculum, the collegiality with classmates, and the various experiences of both my professional and personal life. This growth and development will continue to evolve and expand through life-long learning. Pajak (1993), suggested that "developmental and reflective approaches...express a view that teaching and learning are influenced by the personal,

social, organizational, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they occur (p. 231)." In this paper I will share my reflections of personal characteristics, leadership traits, and administrative roles in education. My knowledge, experiences, and visions will be immersed in these areas of reflection.

Personal Characteristics

My involvement in education, civic organizations, and community projects has allowed me the opportunities to collaborate with individuals from all walks of life. It has been through these experiences that I have realized many things about people. No matter the size of the group, a few risk-taking leaders will always surface. Black and English (1986), suggested that "Effective supervision rests on the premise that certain tasks grouped into jobs are filled with people who know how to do them and on making sure they get done (p. 143)." A leader will lead regardless of the setting. If a group of leaders are working together without a designated leader, a natural sorting process will occur and the group will automatically choose the order of leadership. Personalities will play a big part in these types of

situations. At times, the most outspoken or self-assured person will be peer-appointed to represent the group. However, this is not an indication that others would not be good leaders. Many times I have noticed that individuals that tend to sit back and watch group members can be dynamic leaders. This happens in social groups, steering committees, civic organizations, meetings, businesses, schools, religious settings, and other entities. It is important to value all members of a group as leaders in some rite. I am particularly fond of a quote by Ralph Nader(1994), "I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders not more followers (p.22)."

Our class took the "Life Styles Inventory" in our evaluation class. The results from my inventory were very reflective of my personality and character. My personality comes out in everything that I do. I was very self-assured upon seeing the final scoring on the circumplex. I was high where I should be high and low where I should be low according to the inventory's recommendations for qualities in leaders. My lowest scores were in the areas of power, avoidance, and

oppositional. This indicates that I am not power hungry, I do not avoid problems, and that I am not oppositional regarding my approach to situations. I have thought that perhaps my score in power should be higher, however, with site-based management, it is important to be a collaborator. Payzant (1992), stated that collaboration is "jointly agreeing to identify and then address specific problems and areas of service (p.141)." The decisions made by a power seeker may not be indicative of what is best for all of those involved. I practice shared decision making in my classroom. I feel that it is important for children to learn how to make solid decisions that will affect their educational experiences. At the elementary level, many students have not had many opportunities to make these types of decisions. The process must be taught and practiced under guidance. I think that students that are able to be a part of the classroom decisions learn more about themselves and their learning processes and styles than those who are not included in decision making.

As a teacher, I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the solution, to decide upon the solution, and to

carry out the solution. Having taught in a school where the principal did not believe in shared decisions, I have seen both sides of this issue. I feel that I have more ownership in the district in which I am currently employed. When there is a feeling of ownership I believe that the level of education improves. Glickman (1992), stated "in order for a school to be educationally successful, it must be a community of professionals working together toward a vision of teaching and learning that transcends individual classrooms, grade levels, and departments (p.24)."

My highest scores were in the areas of achievement, self-actualization, humanistic-encouraging, and affiliative. I felt very excited to find out that these are the areas of greatest importance to leadership abilities. I am always a little leery of these types of inventories. However, having taken several different versions of them and having similar results each time, I feel that my results are valid and true. These areas of high scores are very reflective of the real me. I have always been an achiever. I have mentioned my drive in my education. I receive a great deal of satisfaction from

doing something and seeing the end results from doing the job right. I have learned a great deal from other teachers and educators. Being an understanding cheerleader for others has also been a part of my nature. I believe that I have learned from examples at home, growing up. My mom was always for the underdog, the person down on their luck. She gave to others even when it appeared that she had nothing to give.

According to this particular inventory, I need to be more competitive, powerful, oppositional, and have more avoidance. However, since these characteristics may be viewed as negative, I know that I do not want higher scores in those areas. Simply having the knowledge that I tend to score low in these areas is enough for me to use for future reference. In my pursuit of leadership positions, I want to continue learning within my school district and my community. Experience and knowledge will come with each role that I play. I will persist in goal setting and the evaluations of my decisions and actions based upon my experiences.

Leadership Traits

Regardless of the setting, there will usually be an appointed leader, but there will also be other individuals with perceived power. The leader must be effective in group process procedures if the group is to realize its potential. In order for the entire organization to succeed, the leader must be effective in leading the group to succeed.

The leader must be effective in dealing with the various sources of power both internally and externally. This effectiveness is grouped into five areas, suggested by Guthrie and Reed (1991). The areas are:"(1) identification of traits, (2) influence through power, (3) analyses of behaviors, (4) the relationship of situational variables and leadership-the contingency approach, and (5) influence through transactional leadership (p.232)."

Identification of Traits

A leader may be a visionary, a good appraiser, and good at taking action, however, he/she must also possess several pleasing interpersonal skills in order to build support among other members of the organization. Guthrie

and Reed (1991), further suggested the following characteristics or traits as important: "vision, inspiration, strategic orientation, integrity, organizational sophistication, nurturing (p.11)." A leader must also have drive, a feeling of competitiveness, and a great amount of energy. Upon reflection, my own list of leadership characteristics are as follows: 1) A leader possesses strong tendencies toward honesty, supportiveness, trustworthiness, collaboration, building relationships, listening, encouraging, empowering, and fairness. 2) A leader is also non-judgmental, pro-active, persistent, verbally and nonverbally adept, polite, reliable, and visible. 3) A strong leader is an affective time manager, knowledgeable of classroom activities, provides feedback, and presents a professional image. 4) If a leader is to be effective he/she must be a decision maker, an instructional leader, humanistic, current, effective with public, goal-oriented, promote risk-taking. I believe that these are the day-to-day things that are of interest to the members of an organization. Support staff and teachers need to be able to see these qualities in action in a leader in

order to follow and be supportive of that leader. The problem with this extensive list is just that. Is it possible for one person to be all of those things? I believe it is.

Much of the list includes personality traits which are innate. Some leadership skills may be easily developed others may not. I think that it depends on the individual. It would appear that leadership comes easily for some and not so easily for others. Therefore, leaders need to focus on personal strengths and work to improve weaknesses continuously. Personality will play a big part in the position of an administrator and how issues are dealt with. According to Gorton (1991), "administrative behavior results from two basic elements: institutional-role expectations which emanate from the normative dimension of the organization, and individual personality and need dispositions, which together constitute the personal dimension (p.90)." Gorton also stated that the administrative roles are: "manager, instructional leader, disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator, and conflict mediator (p. 85)."

Transformational Leadership Approach

In this approach the followers' behaviors are influenced by the leader. The followers become more motivated and have better attitudes. These improvements come about because of the reverence held for the leader. Dwight Eisenhower (1994) once described leadership as: "The art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it (p.63)." Rosalynn Carter (1994) said, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go, but ought to be (p.37)."

Influence Through Power and Analysis of Behaviors

This influence refers to the use of power and authority within an organization. Each individual within the organization possesses a certain amount of power. This could be in the form of money, knowledge, connections, or position. These forms of power can be used to help or hinder the progress of the organization. For example, a wealthy parent may have influence over an administrator that is seeking funding from the community for a special project. A teacher may use connections that they have to convince a city leader to speak at an

elementary graduation. An administrator may be able to provide extra help in securing a teaching position for an applicant at another school because of networking. This power must be realized and recognized. Some people use their power to break down an organization, others use it for the good of the organization. As a leader, it is important to understand the power within the district, school, and individuals. For example, there is an elementary school in our district that has been having some problems lately. Basically, the principal is not effective in that setting. She is very nice and possesses many leadership qualities. However, about two-thirds of her staff have been in that building, some in the same classroom for more than twenty years. Needless to say, those veteran teachers are running the show. Even the secretary and librarian have been there since the early seventies. The principal makes very few decisions, and when she does they are not popular. The staff has been given the opportunity to make decisions for many years. I do not believe that the education of the children is suffering. Personally, I would find it difficult to grow professionally in that type of

environment. This is why I believe that it is important to understand the informal power structure within an organization. At our building, we have a teacher that tends to get herself in the middle of issues. She will initiate a controversial topic to the individuals known for causing conflict and then she will remove herself from the action. Left with this conflict, the others will discuss and become very agitated without knowing all of the details. This causes quite a disturbance. Eventually, one of them will talk to our principal about the rift, but it is usually after they have circulated the building with inaccurate information. The principal has discussed this problem with the staff and has urged everyone to have all of the facts before assuming anything. I believe that it is pathetic for adults to act this immaturely. This, to me, is an example of improperly used power or influence. The originator knows that she can get something stirred up if she speaks to the right person. Power or influence should be used in a positive way by and for individuals and the organization. When the leader has a working understanding of power and how it works within

individuals and groups it is much easier to prevent misuse of that power.

As individual roles of players become apparent, the roles of the leader become more defined. The leader must become a group observer. What are the group dynamics? What individuals have power and influence? Is it positive or negative influence? How will each of these players work toward the goal? How will the goal affect each player and their personal position in the formal organization as-well-as informal? The leader, while maintaining a focus on the goals, must also consider the people side of things.

Contingency Approach

The role of the leader changes with the people involved and the task to be accomplished. Various leadership skills and styles are needed when working with many different kinds of people and tasks. The leader must be perceptive enough to realize the role/roles he/she must play at various times depending on the situation. The job/role of the leader is contingent upon the players and the task/goal. Murphy (1995), suggested " three major trends appear to be taking root, namely,

increased attention to ethics and values, the social context of schooling, and the craft dimensions of the professions (p.67)." The contingency approach could prove very helpful in dealing with these trends. I view this approach as the wearing of many hats and coats, and knowing when to wear each one.

Analysis of Behaviors

Guthrie and Reed (1991), identified this approach referring to the "concern for the individual and for the task of the organization(p.234)." Leaders should use a variety of styles and be flexible. These styles are dependent upon the given situation. I believe that the leader must be able to evaluate or analyze the situation and then make an educated decision about how to approach it. The consideration of the people involved or the goals of the school may alter a decision and change the plan of action to be taken. Flexibility, to me, is a very important trait. Lyons and Shelton (1994) suggested that flexibility is vital for a principal and that he/she "must be able to engage in a collaborative process with the staff that results in the school's ability to respond

effectively and continuously to the demand for school improvement (p.46)."

Administrative Roles

Guthrie and Reed (1991), suggested that administrative roles consist of " goal setting, organizational planning, guiding instruction, implementing curricular changes, and evaluating personnel (p.229)." Gorton (1991), grouped these roles into six major roles of an administrator. They include the following: manager, instructional leader, disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator, and conflict mediator. A school administrator is expected to be extremely competent in all of these areas. Weaknesses are easily spotted by critics. Therefore, it is important for administrators to continually improve. The following is my reflection on these roles.

Manager

A manager is defined as one who manages. A leader must be a manager and needs to be able to run the show, keep things going, and make sure that all individuals involved are in place and ready to go. A manager is expected to know where an organization is going, who is

going, and how they are going to get there. Gorton(1991), stated "By successfully performing their role as managers, administrators can help others to accomplish tasks and goals; in the process they can generate a more positive attitude toward their contributions to their school (p.86-87)."

I feel that I am a very good manager. I have always set goals for myself, both personal and professional. So far, I have accomplished the things that I have set out to do. Planning for the future and deciding which road to take to get there has almost been instinctive to me. I am also very organized which is part of being a good manager.

Instructional Leader

I believe that an instructional leader is someone who exhibits, encourages, and promotes educational excellence. This could be in curriculum, classroom management, learning strategies, or any other area related to instruction. Gorton(1991), suggested "a focus on development or improvement, not merely maintenance, and on instructional leadership, as opposed to other kinds of leadership (p.319)."

My instructional leadership abilities have developed over time. As I have gained experience in all areas of education, I have found myself in leadership positions quite frequently. This may be because I am continually learning and expanding my personal knowledge base. I often enter into discussions with peers regarding educational practices. These conversations lead to a greater understanding of the need for solid leadership in instruction.

Disciplinarian

A disciplinarian has always been the one who doles out punishment, I believe. Gorton(1991), stated that a disciplinarian "traditionally has implied one who punishes someone else (p.88)." It usually is seen as a negative role. Gorton also suggested "Generally, administrators resist or reject the role of disciplinarian because of the negative connotation of the term and because of the duties associated with the role are frequently frustrating, irritating, and unpleasant to perform (p.88)." Though this particular role is not always the favorite part of being an administrator, I believe that a major part of the day for a principal may

be spent on this role. Many times it seems as if my own principal spends hours working on one particular incident in order to sort all of the information before coming to a conclusion about what actually happened.

I feel that discipline is an area of strength for me. The students in our building know that I have high expectations for behavior. I teach the rules and expectations at the beginning of the year. This approach is very successful for me. Being proactive can prevent problems among the adults in the building as-well-as the students. Therefore, I feel that the job of a disciplinarian does not always have to be negative.

Facilitator of Human Relations

Being a human relations facilitator, to me, means being able to help each human in whatever way they need help. It is important to be able to listen to any and all concerns as if each was the most important issue to be dealt with. Proactive facilitation can prove to be a vital part of human relations. Gorton(1991), suggested that administrators need to "practice good human relations in all aspects of their jobs, and in relationships with people generally. However, the two

areas in which this becomes particularly important are in the developing of high staff morale and a humane school environment (p.88)."

I have always been a good listener, which I believe to be an important part of being an effective administrator. Many times I have found myself in a counseling position with peers needing advice. I have a warm and friendly personality which serves as an open invitation for discussions with others. I really enjoy helping others to look for the base of the problem. At times, it is really necessary to present some solutions, yet at other times the problem needs to be solved by the person with the problem. Knowing which of these is the best for those involved is not always apparent and the final decision is not always popular.

Evaluator

An evaluator's job may include assessing students, teachers, and programs. The job is to decide what is working well and what is not, and then do something about it. There needs to be a plan for how things can be changed or altered in order to work the best possible way.

I am constantly evaluating myself, my teaching, my lesson plans, and every other part of my program. I make changes as needed in order to ensure a great education for the students. I am getting some hands-on experience with a student-teacher. Together, we are working to improve and polish her practices. This has been very helpful in my growth.

Conflict Mediator

This job is a combination of several of the roles already mentioned. It involves being in the middle of a problem, listening to all of the information, helping to solve the problem, and planning for future prevention.

I have had a great deal of practice being a mediator. I have five brothers and sisters; someone was always arguing or fighting. I have learned many different strategies for mediating. Like many other roles, the most important thing to do is listen.

I have had many opportunities to practice all of these administrative roles in one setting or another. However, that does not mean that there is not room for improvement. I want to take what I have learned, continue to apply this knowledge, and then learn from the

experiences. I want to be able to work in a setting that promotes community learning. Barth (1990), described a community of learners as " a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning (p.9)."

I do not believe that being an administrator is an easy job. It takes many hours of seen and unseen work. There are many roles to play, as I have discussed. I believe that some of the most important work is not always seen. Winter and Sweeney (1994), suggested that the most important role is to create a supportive climate within the school and list the following strategies to achieve it: "talking to teachers, recognizing teacher achievement, backing up teachers, encouragement sparks motivation, showing you care, and fairness in administration (p.66-68)." These are some strategies that will be noticed if they are not acted upon. I know that with the support of the principal the climate is conducive to great educational advancement because teachers and staff will feel the trust and freedom to do their jobs well. Leiberman (1996), suggested that

"teachers and administrators label, share, and discuss their work experiences (p.52-53)." This will only happen in a supportive and trusting environment.

It is difficult for me to express all that I have learned over the last few years. I can remember what it was like as a new teacher. I had many insecurities. I was concerned about how I would be able to meet all of the needs of the students in my class. I jumped right in and started teaching the best way that I knew how. I made changes when they were needed. I reflected daily on the lessons taught and the progress made. Collaboration was vital in my first teaching position. I was one of four teachers for a k-6 Catholic school. We did it all. We met daily to discuss what was working and what was not. This daily routine helped me learn the practice of reflection and working as a team. This also taught me to consistently look for who, what, where, when, why, and how concepts were being introduced and practiced in my classroom. I have been in this reflective mode for many years now. I believe that it is second nature for me. My mind is continually evaluating what is going on around me. Adjusting is something that I do well. These

strategies will help me as I continue on the road of leadership experiences.

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