Where am I going? Where have I been?

Teresa R. Coenen

University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©1997 Teresa R. Coenen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation


This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
Where am I going? Where have I been?

Abstract
The task of writing a reflective essay is to describe my educational philosophy and beliefs, how they were framed and formed, and how I hope to apply them in future applications. In order to understand my goals, one must first look at the path that has lead me to these goals. Before I can truly understand where I am going, I must first review where I have been. I have never – not even for one minute – regretted my decision to become an educator. In the last seven years, I have never wished to skip a single day of work. I love my job; I love my students; I love my colleagues; and I love learning.
WHERE AM I GOING? WHERE HAVE I BEEN?

A Reflective Research Paper

Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Teresa R. Coenen
May, 1997
This Research Paper by: Teresa R. Coenen

Entitled: WHERE AM I GOING? WHERE HAVE I BEEN?

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

April 9, 1997
Date Approved
Robert H. Decker
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

4/3/97
Date Received
Dale R. Jackson
Coordinator, Educational Leadership

4.9.97
Date Received
Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
Where Am I Going? Where Have I Been?

The task of writing a reflective essay is to describe my educational philosophy and beliefs, how they were framed and formed, and how I hope to apply them in future applications. I was uncertain as to how I would capture the essence of my philosophy and beliefs and commit them to paper in such a way that the reader could feel what I feel, view the world as I see it, and understand as I understand. The more I thought about this assignment, the more impossible it became. That is when I came to the conclusion that this assignment was designed so that I would gain a greater insight to my philosophy and purpose as an educator, and hopefully, my reader would begin to understand what makes me “tick” and would be satisfied that my philosophy, beliefs and values are in alignment with my goals for the future.

In order to understand my goals, one must first look at the path that has lead me to these goals. Before I can truly understand where I am going, I must first review where I have been. As I reflected on my past experiences, I discovered the source of several guiding principles and paradoxes that are reflected in my values, beliefs and educational philosophy.

WHERE HAVE I BEEN?

Guiding Principal #1: There Is No Place Like Home

My rural roots grow deep in Harrison County, Iowa. I was raised on a farm near Persia, a fourth generation descendent of Harrison County homesteaders. My heritage is as rich as the soil that has provided a livelihood for my family for over a century.

As a child, I never knew that my parents struggled to make ends met. No one had ever described my family as poor. We had everything we needed: a home with hand-made curtains and quilts; plenty of fresh-baked bread, garden vegetables, and
recently butchered beef; clothes (mostly hand-made) and shoes for all season; recreational activities in town; and the love and support of dear friends and family. Naively, I thought all children enjoyed a similar lifestyle.

Guiding Principal #2: There Is No Substitute For Hard Work

The second of three daughters, I was the “best son my father had.” I learned to drive a tractor and help with field work and livestock chores. It was a real treat to help Dad load five or six mean, old sows in the back of our pickup at 6:30 a.m. and haul them to market at the Omaha Livestock Yards. My father would open the twelve-foot door of the Livestock Exchange Building, and I would enter the marble foyer, anxious to take it all in: the two-story vaulted entryway with marble pillars, ornate crown and dentil molding, and carved oak panel walls and doors. The early morning sun streamed in the ten-foot high east windows, reflecting and refracting on every wrist watch, pair of glasses and coffee cup in the expansive hall. I would sit on one of four pew-like benches in the lobby while my father would ride the pullman-operated elevator to the third floor to transact the day’s business. My father would return bearing gifts: three plastic piggy banks bearing the name “F.A. Wellman and Sons” -- one for me, and two to take home for my sisters. To thank me for helping that morning, Dad would give me two shiny quarters to place in my bank, but sometimes I would splurge on a phosphate and a candy bar at the soda fountain.

My memories of these trips are priceless to me: the beautiful architecture and the cheerful characters who would call out my father’s name and greet him with a warm “Whatcha been up to?” or “How-the-hell are ya?” It was interesting to note that nouns, verbs and adverbs at the livestock yards were often adapted to include colloquial contractions or exuberant expletives. It is odd, but I do not recall being in the least bit repulsed by the pervasive stench of cattle and hog manure that infiltrated the magnificent
building. Nor was I ever ashamed that, like my father, I traveled to Omaha and back home again in dirty work clothes and hog boots. It went without question: this is what farm families did at the time.

Guiding Principal #3: Life Affords Opportunities To Those Who Look For Them

One might question the relationship between these childhood memories and my philosophy of education, but in my mind, the link is solid, clear, and two-fold. First, and foremost, I developed an appreciation for the many opportunities that life affords us if we choose to look for the good instead of the bad. Forever the optimist, I am still filled with joy and wonderment each time I drive past the Livestock Exchange Building, now a victim of neglect and a depressed local livestock market. The second connection between my memories and my educational philosophy is the sinking awareness that, from a low socio-economic background, I was a child at-risk, and without the care and attention of loving parents and a few extraordinary teachers, I easily could have fallen through the cracks.

In junior high, I experienced my first major obstacle and first educational opportunity. I did not anticipate any difficulties in the transition from elementary to junior high school. With an older sister who was leaving the junior high for the hallowed halls of high school, I was confident that I knew my way around, and I was anxious for the new challenges that junior high would pose. Unfortunately, not all of the challenges were pleasant experiences for me.

Paradox #1: Rules And Standards For Teachers And Coaches Differ At Times

My first major obstacle presented itself in the form of an extracurricular activity. We attended school in Logan, 14 miles away, so I did not dream of asking my parents if I could go out for cheerleading or attend any of the junior high football games. When basketball season rolled around, my parents agreed to allow me to participate as long as
it did not interfere with my chores. This seemed fair enough: I would do my chores in the dark, if necessary. Unfortunately, transportation soon became an issue that we had not anticipated. My parents could not afford to come to town and pick me up after practice, so I arranged rides with a neighbor boy who wrestled heavyweight in the high school. Wrestling practice ended long after junior high basketball practice, so I lifted weights and finished my homework to pass the time. On some Tuesday and Thursday nights, however, I could not attend basketball practice because Lee, my ride, had a wrestling meet to attend and my parents were unable to transport me. I understand and accepted that my playing time would be reduced in the games -- that would be fair. But the coach’s sarcastic comments, “She thinks she’s too good to show up for practice,” were not fair. These comments hurt and humiliated me in front of my teammates and, sometimes, in front of my classmates. The coach, who was also my social studies teacher, often used the classroom as an extended gymnasium -- one more place to go over plays, review statistics, and applaud or berate players when necessary.

I never dreamed of telling my parents about the coach. It would only hurt their feelings. Besides, I knew my father’s response would be, “Buck up, Fritz. Move on.” Although my father was no wordsmith, Dad had always set a good example of how to deal with life’s challenges without complaint. I had received a lesson in life that all student athletes receive: rules and standards for teachers and coaches may differ at times. Fair, or not fair; that’s just the way it is. I realize now, that it does not have to be that way.

Guiding Principal #4: Students Will Live Up To A Teacher’s Expectations

In eighth grade, I experienced my first big educational opportunity. The most extraordinary teacher I had ever met, Mrs. Marion Dunlap, took the time and trouble to recognize exceptionalities in a few of her English students. Interestingly enough, the
four students she chose to receive special instruction were not the popular students who usually received most of the attention. Rick Powell, Sherri Coffelt, Bandi Clark and I were allowed to leave the classroom and finish our required Wariner's English Grammar on an individualized basis at a more advanced pace. We were assigned to a large broom closet for our individualized instruction. Two weeks into the second semester, we had completed the Wariner's text and were ready for the new challenges that were ahead of us. Mrs. Dunlap would come to the broom closet for five to ten minutes each day to bring us some of her "treasures" and assign reading and activities for the many classics she brought us from her personal collection. Mrs. Dunlap even called my parents once to thank them for raising such a "voracious reader." I had to look up the meaning of the word, voracious. At the end of the year, I wanted to give Mrs. Dunlap a gift. I wanted to thank her for "hooking" me and encouraging me throughout the year. I made Mrs. Dunlap a pot holder, woven on a loom with nylon bands. I chose pink and green designed as a plaid on a yellow background because I was quite certain that this was Mrs. Dunlap's favorite color combination. I had come to this conclusion because Mrs. Dunlap often wore a polyester suit jacket with a similar pink and green plaid. She sent me a note to thank me for the gift, and acknowledged the though that went into the planning of the design.

Many years later, When I student taught high school English at a nearby school, Mrs. Dunlap sent me the worn and shabby pot holder with a note to remind me that students will live up to a teacher's expectations. What a profound woman!

Guiding Principal #5: Direct Experience Is A Better Teacher Than A Text Book

The summer before I entered high school closed on a very positive note: Dad won a $600 daily double at the AkSarBen race track, and our family embarked on our first, and only, family vacation. We traveled north and west, staying with family and
friends along the way. I soaked up the history, geography, and sociology of our travels: the Corn Palace, Black Hills, and the Badlands of South Dakota; Bear Country, U.S.A; Wahl Drug; Mount Rushmore; the geysers and sulfur springs at Yellowstone; the majestic beauty of the Grand Tetons and the Rocky Mountains; the first stages of the creation of Crazy Horse Mountain; a melodrama in Jackson Hole, Wyoming; feeding prairie dogs near Butte, Montana; ranching in eastern Washington; the Space Needle in Seattle; and deep sea fishing off the coast of Portland. I tasted salty sea water for the first time, and I knew that this two-week vacation had brought to life all that I had read about in social studies. Oftentimes, direct experience is a better teacher than a textbook.

Guiding Principal #6: Without Dreams, Life Is Barren

My love and passion for English grammar and literature stayed with me through high school and college. With every year that passed, I discovered a “new” favorite author. I am fascinated by an author’s ability to develop universal themes in such a way that personalizes the readings. Willa Cather, Carl Sandburg, Walt Whitman, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth stand out as my “fave five,” but the words of Langston Hughes’ “Dreams” (1932) drive me and inspire me:

“Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dream go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.”
Throughout the years, I have shared the poetry of Langston Hughes with my students to “hook” and inspire them. If I have a student who is not inspired by Hughes’ words, I can substitute hundreds of authors until I find the right one.

Just as I rely on the power of the written word to motivate and inspire me, I also use the written word to keep things in perspective. In Sara Teasdale’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” (1920), the poet reminds me that “...Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree If mankind perished utterly: And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, Would scarcely know that we were gone.”

In addition to inspiration and introspection, literature provides me with words when I am at a loss for them. Just as “there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecclesiastes, 1:9), the title of this reflective essay is borrowed from Flannery O’Connor’s short story, Where Are You Going? Where Have You Been?

I continued my love of literature through high school at Lo-Ma, and, almost without exception, my high school experience was a wonderful one. As a student in a 1-A rural Iowa school, I had close, personal contact with all of my teachers, and I had the opportunity to be in nearly every extracurricular activity. These were the glory days! Naively, I thought all of my school mates were enjoying the same, wonderful experience.

Paradox #2: Students Will Live Down To A Teacher’s Expectations

My next educational roadblock came in the form of “misguidance.” During my senior year, many of my classmates were caught up in the frenzy of college visits, completing college applications, and filing financial aid packets. I made a visit to our guidance counselor/calculus teacher to ask him if there was any paper work that I needed to get started on. He responded that, indeed, I did not have to worry about going to college because college was not for everybody, and that I should choose a career that
would be satisfying to me, such as secretarial work or hair dressing. My parents supported the guidance counselor's position, commenting that many smart, wealthy people did not go to college at all. I never once considered that the counselor's advice might be prejudiced by my low socio-economic status and my residence on the wrong side of the county, and I never considered that my parent's advice might be based on their limited view of the world, which in this case, did not seem to exist outside of Harrison County. In the spring, I graduated third in my class of 80 students, and I registered for summer secretarial courses at a business school.

In the fall, I went to work as a recordkeeper for a human services agency. I filed, recorded, and typed. Luckily for me, my junior high English teacher, Mrs. Dunlap intervened. Over the Christmas holidays, I visited her at home to return a Hemmingway collection that I had borrowed in high school. She asked me what classes I had taken at college, and appeared shocked to find out that my course work had focused on secretarial skills. I can remember the strength of her arm as she stretched it across my shoulders in a firm embrace and assured me that we had to get me to a real college where I could major in English. That's exactly what I did. With Mrs. Dunlap's help, I registered for the spring semester at Dana College.

After I graduated from Dana with a major in language arts, I was lured into private industry by the salary potential. I had big stars -- and dollar signs -- in my eyes, but my heart yearned to teach English. Five years lapsed before I returned to Dana to pick up a minor in psychology and a major in secondary education. The bulk of my education classes were with Dr. Kay Ferguson, my newfound mentor and friend.

When trying to find words to describe Dr. Kay, it is difficult to limit myself to one paragraph. Dr. Kay is the quintessential educator: kind, caring, intelligent, confident, patient, soft-spoken, motivating, thoughtful, inspiring, busy, challenging,
endearing, resourceful, and encouraging. The only asset that Dr. Kay does not possess to a high degree is “well-organized.” It would not be uncommon for Dr. Kay to prepare us to observe a model teacher in action and send us on the wrong day, or assign a difficult group project for presentation and then forget to ask us to present it before the class.

I have developed a theory regarding the absent-minded professor syndrome. A person must have capacity for a certain number of gifts, or assets. In Dr. Kay’s case, if she were to acquire keen organization skills, she would have to give up one of her many other gifts. In this case, which gift could she do without? I think none. Dr. Kay models the other assets so well, that it was easy for me to overlook her disorganization. As pre-service teachers, my peers and I learned the value of calling ahead to double check arrangements and the value in preparing a presentation versus “winging it.” As a result of Dr. Kay’s disorganization, my organizational skills improved. And you never know with Dr. Kay, that result may have been the one that she was striving for.

THE METAMORPHOSIS

In my first class with Dr. Kay, I heard her describe my classmates and me as “change agents.” This concept was foreign, yet intriguing, to me. As our classes with Dr. Kay progressed, she challenged us to throw away the book and dig into the research. Dr. Kay introduced us to the Hunter Model, Synectics, Kohlberg Dilemma Model, Torrence Creativity Model, Preventative Classroom Management, Bloom’s Mastery Learning Method, Authentic Assessment, Dunn & Dunn’s Learning Styles, Learning Contracts, Myers-Briggs Type Indicators, Piagetian Tasks, Cooperative Learning Models, Flanders Observations, and Simulation Instructional Methods. Naively, I assumed that we were learning what some, if not most, veteran teachers already knew. I did think it odd, however, that I had never experienced any of these methods or
instructional designs during my own high school experience ten years earlier. I decided that the practice of education must have truly changed over the decade.

Like a sponge, I soaked it all up. Dr. Kay told me that I would be a change agent, and I was ready for the challenge. We spent the final six weeks before our student teaching experience in “the block,” a compressed schedule designed to reinforce all that we had learned and prepare us for our impending experiences. During the block, we prepared our resumés and portfolios of micro-teaching lessons. Dr. Kay emphasized the importance of reflection and introspection when composing our personal instructional philosophy. She advised that a good philosophy is one that an educator would be willing to commit to for the rest of his/her life. Realizing the significance of this seemingly simple phrase, I agonized for days over the proper wording. The resulting philosophy which appeared on my pre-service resumé is the same philosophy that I use on my administrative resumé today: Each student is unique and possesses a unique style of learning; when this uniqueness is closely attended to, every student can experience academic and personal success.

My student teaching experience at Harlan High School was challenging and exciting. My cooperating teacher, Vicki Gray, turned her classroom over to me, providing insight, wisdom and guidance whenever I needed it. I taught one section of Honors English 10, three sections of regular English 10, and two sections of Speech. Vicki allowed me to deviate from the regular curriculum in order to incorporate reality-based instructional methods.

Operation Desert Storm provided the backdrop for an integrated curriculum unit involving history, geography, and written and oral communication skills. The unit culminated with “Soldier Week,” a school-wide effort to collect materials and supplies for “care packages” to be sent to American soldiers stationed in Kuwait. Boxes and
boxes of goods were collected in the auditorium. A local philanthropist offered to pay the $600 shipping bill. Soldier Week was a huge success.

Two years later, when I attended graduation receptions for some of the students who had been in my sophomore English classes, I was told by more than one student that the Desert Storm unit had been the most memorable learning experience they had had in high school. This should not have come as a surprise to me; I learned the same lesson on vacation with my family several years earlier.

One of the paradoxes I witnessed in childhood also resurfaced during my student teaching experience. When mid-term grades came out, I received a visit from Harlan’s esteemed football coach. For the past six seasons, Harlan had played in “The Dome,” and I had made the “mistake” of sending a down letter to one of Harlan’s starting linemen. The coach asked me to sharpen my pencil and re-average the grades to insure that his lineman was academically eligible to play. Upon careful review, I could find no error in my computations, and the grade stood. Surprisingly enough, the lineman played the following Friday against arch rivals, the Lewis Central Titans. On Monday morning, my cooperating teacher and I met with the high school principal. Checking the computer, he found that the grade, which I originally recorded as an “F,” was now recorded as a “D-.” Without proof that the head football coach had tampered with the grade, no action was taken. Indeed, the rules seemed to be different for teachers and coaches.

I wanted to pursue the matter further, but did not. My cooperating teacher reminded me that when given a choice between a student teacher and a winning football coach, Harlan would ultimately side with the football coach. I acted in opposition to my ethical nature, and I dropped the issue. For several years, I was bothered by my failure to act. Last year, when Harlan defeated a favored opponent in a play-off game, the
newspapers sang the praises of the coach who would take the Cyclones to the dome for the twelfth time. I wrote a letter to the coach, reminding him of our encounter six years previous. In the letter, I asked the coach how many truly winning seasons he could count, when the wins did not come at the expense of his values. I never received a response, but I was able to confirm my belief that Paradox #1 was only true in the absence of integrity. Rules and standards are only different for teachers and coaches when we allow them to be different.

As a student teacher, I had successfully challenged all of my students to improve themselves. My use of mastery learning methods during the second quarter resulted in improved grades and improved self-esteem of even the hard to reach students. To reward my efforts the school district offered me the opportunity to develop Harlan’s alternative high school. My future as a “change agent” had begun.

In order to develop a quality program, had to conduct a thorough study. I visited several alternative schools across the state, and I read everything I could get my hands on. It was clear from my reading that successful alternative programs met students’ emotional, as well as educational needs (Simmons, 1990). I began my search for materials that would meet the students’ emotional needs. I attended conferences and training workshops designed to develop students’ self-esteem and social skills.

My vision for the alternative school was multi-dimensional. The function of the alternative program was divided into four components: the academic strand, personal/social skill development, the career strand, and citizenship development. Academically, the instructional program was based on Bloom’s (1976) learning for mastery method which incorporates the expectation that all students can master all instructional objectives. Curricular materials were selected according to each student’s individual needs.
In order to develop a shared sense of purpose, I recruited students and their families in the process of defining the educational philosophy of the alternative school. Students also assisted in the design of the physical environment and daily structure. The result was a successful continuation school with a more personalized relationship between the students and staff.

A year and one-half later, five superintendents from my own county visited my alternative school. In the next few weeks, they sent their high school principals and guidance counselors to observe and assess. The superintendents asked me to make a presentation promoting the need for a similar program in Harrison County at their county-wide school board meeting. Less than two hours later, the board members voted unanimously to open an alternative high school under my supervision.

The Harrison County Flexible Education Center has had a very successful track record. Approximately 85% of our students become success stories. We have received state, regional and national attention as a model alternative high school. I feel I am truly blessed to be able to do what I love to do in my own back yard.

When I first entered the administration program at University of Northern Iowa via the Iowa Communications Network, I was certain that I did not want to become a traditional school administrator. The alternative school setting was very comfortable to me, and I was unwilling to give up the autonomy of alternative education for the bureaucracy of traditional education. But over the last two years, as I have traveled across the state, consulting with school administrators and their staff members regarding at-risk student issues, I have become increasingly certain that students do not fail school: schools fail students.

I have been frequently told, by reluctant teachers and administrators, that alternative school methods and philosophies could never work in a “real” school. Even
four of my own superintendents have verbalized their doubts about transferring alternative methodologies and ideologies to a traditional setting. One of my superintendents, however, stands behind me when I ask, “Why not?” If alternative school methods and strategies can successfully engage and challenge the most reluctant learners, why cannot the same methods and strategies be used to challenge and engage all learners? This superintendent agrees with me that the schools of the 21st century will look nothing like the schools of today, and that the only sure path to the future is through futuristic thinking and planning.

This same superintendent, Paul Tedesco, has challenged my reliance on the autonomy of the alternative school setting. Mr. Tedesco has encouraged me to venture outside of my comfort zone and apply my philosophy and theories in a traditional setting. He has implied that being a “change agent” is easy in a setting where everyone is eager for change, but that being a “change agent” in a traditional school setting would be much more challenging. I realize, however, that reformation can not take place in a traditional school district if the teachers, administration, school board and community are not ready for change. Mr. Tedesco assured me that the timing was right in his school district. They were currently looking for a secondary administrator, and Mr. Tedesco wants a “change agent.”

I was intrigued by the possibilities of working under Mr. Tedesco’s administration. I viewed the position as another opportunity to do what I love to do in my own back yard. The Boyer Valley High School is seven miles from my rural home. My interviews with the community, teachers, students and administrative committees went very well. I ranked first with the community and administration, and I ranked second with the teachers. Recently, I interviewed with the school board, and I received Mr. Tedesco’s recommendation for the position.
Unfortunately, there are no sure bets in life. In open session, the school board voted 5-3 to reject the superintendent’s recommendation, stating their concern for the security of the alternative school if I were to leave my administrative position there. In actuality, the seated board has a history of micromanagement. Consequently, the position was offered to and accepted by a Nebraska candidate who ranked second with the administration and third with the community and teachers in the first round interviews. The politics and micro-politics of school board decisions can be very interesting to observe and evaluate.

WHERE AM I GOING?

A secondary school administrator, traditional or alternative, is a virtual hat tree. The butcher, the backer, the candlestick maker... A high school principal is all of these and then some. As a butcher, the principal is responsible for recruiting and selecting the “finest cuts,” teacher, and marketing the school’s products to the community. As a baker, the principal must combine the right “ingredients,” teaching methods, curriculum, environment, technology, and learning styles, in order to produce a multi-tiered masterpiece with an appealing presentation. And any good baker knows that sometimes the recipe must be modified in order to accommodate a variation in the ingredients. Finally, just as the candlestick maker recycles dwindling wax stumps and reshapes them into tall, tapered beauties, the principal is a master of recycling dwindling teacher and student energies, creating forward motion.

More specifically, I learned in my masters program that the school administrator performs six primary functions: instructional leader, manager, disciplinarian, human relations facilitator, evaluator and conflict mediator (Corton & Schaeider, 1991). These are the many hats of an administrator. In an alternative setting, the hats are more like baseball caps, somewhat informal, because the setting tends to be collegial, rather than
political or bureaucratic. In a traditional school setting, the hats could be baseball caps, but with the influence of politics and bureaucracy, they are more likely to be formal top hats.

I have become very comfortable in my informal baseball caps, but when the occasion calls for it, I don my top hat and perform a traditional song and dance. For my own sense of security and focus, I wear my baseball cap under my top hat. Ssshh! No one knows! This is our secret.

The Principal As Instructional Leader

In its simple definition, the principal is the lead or principal teacher in an instructional setting. Ideally speaking, a principal’s primary role is instructional leadership. I was advised by one of my former principals that practically speaking, however, this is not the case (K. Klinkefus, personal communication, May, 1996). Mr. Klinkefus indicated that although the principal is accountable as the instructional leader, there are not enough hours in a day to give this role the attention it deserves.

I have also discovered that teachers might be reluctant to view the principal as an instructional leader because of the principal’s lack of core knowledge of the various subject areas. In my recent administrative interview with a teacher committee, I was asked by the industrial arts teacher how I, a language arts major, intended to provide instructional leadership in areas in which I was not certified. I responded that I would make every attempt to become informed in all instructional areas, but that I viewed my role as an instructional leader as a collegial role. As a colleague, I would have to rely on the expertise of the teaching staff to direct me to or provide me with the information I would need to support them in their daily instructional efforts. As an instructional leader, I would have the responsibility of assisting them in their efforts to develop
comprehensive professional growth plans and providing them with opportunities and resources to grow professionally.

The Principal As Manager

The main role of the principal as manager is to “develop or implement policies and procedures resulting in the efficient operation of the school” (Gorton & Schneider, 1991, p. 86). If administrators are successful in these efforts, they are acclaimed as great principals. If, however, they make mistakes -- Dr. Decker calls them fatal errors -- in this area, they will be looking for new employment opportunities.

Accountability to the community may lead the principal away from a collegial model of management in favor of a bureaucratic or political model of management. Effective implementation of site-based management or shared decision making allows schools to reflect democracy in action (Achilles, 1994). Teachers, community members, students, and administrators can be empowered to participate in decision making across eight dimensions: goals and vision; facilitating procedures and structures; curriculum and instruction; budgeting; staffing; staff development; operations; and standards (Russell, Cooper, & Greenblatt, 1992). As an administrator, I am very comfortable with the concept of shared decision making given that the empowered individuals have demonstrated the ability to collaborate effectively.

The Principal As Disciplinarian

Theodore Roosevelt’s advice to “speak softly, and carry a big stick” has been widely held as an acceptable philosophy of discipline. Although I can realize the importance of speaking softly, I have a problem with yielding a weapon (figuratively speaking). The belief underlying this philosophy is that the threat of punishment will curtail inappropriate behavior.
It is my philosophy that students can, with proper training, master high levels of self-discipline. The principal and the teachers have a duty to help students behave responsibly. Students have demonstrated throughout history that they cannot, will not, be managed or controlled effectively by punitive measures applied by teachers and administrators (Dubelle, 1995). A more effective method of student discipline is to teach students how to behave appropriately. Many educators operate under the assumption that students know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. My experience as an alternative educator has provided evidence that this is not the case. In many cases, students need to be taught how, and, in some cases, why, to behave appropriately. Ruth Herman Wells developed many lessons and strategies specific to improving student behavior with simple goals such as: “To assist youth to recognize the importance of punctuality in our society, and to aid them to develop the skills to regularly arrive on time” (1991). Like Wells, I believe that students would prefer to stay out of trouble, despite the appearance that they are looking for trouble. Given the right training, students can learn to behave appropriately and take responsibility for their own discipline.

In order to develop self-responsibility among students, I have incorporated behavioral teaching strategies across the curriculum at the Flexible Education Center. All staff members have been trained to successfully teach skills using Vicki Phillip’s Personal Development (1992) and Constance Dembrowski’s Personal and Social Responsibility (1988). Students are taught methods of improving self-image, communicating effectively, accepting responsibility, setting and achieving goals, and solving problems. I have also found that supplemental curricular materials can be helpful in addressing specific behavior problems that are not covered in our established curriculum. Options (Anema & Sanders, 1994) is a three-book simulation in which
students are allowed to role play scenes which may be all too familiar to them. I refer to this series when I have a situation at hand that closely relates to one of the scenarios presented. I also use individual instructional objectives from other resources: Prevention Curriculum (Conrath, 1993), Complete Communication Skills Activities Kit (Hay & Zboray, 1992), Relationships and Communications Activities (Toner, 1993), and Social Skills Lessons & Activities (Begun, 1996). Although this is not an exhaustive accounting of all resources on the market, I have found these texts to be very useful to me as a teacher and as an administrator.

In addition to teaching self-responsibility and self-discipline, I am a firm believer that school environment and unprofessional teacher behaviors can play a large role in encouraging or escalating inappropriate behavior. An administrator is responsible for creating within the school the best learning situation possible by developing an atmosphere of mutual respect; a teacher should, by example, teach honesty, common courtesy, respect for law and order, and self-discipline, and above all, be fair, firm and consistent in enforcing school rules (Dubelle, 1995). This set of rules applies to all students, not just the "bad kids." It is my belief that there are not bad students -- just students with bad behaviors. Educators have a responsibility to do everything in their power to help students overcome these behaviors and acquire self-discipline.

The Principal As Human Relations Facilitator

Gorton and Schneider (1991) emphasize that high staff morale and a humane school environment are the most important goals of the administrator’s human relations efforts. Black and English (1986) emphasize the importance of using human relations skills in order to tap the power structure of the community. It has been my experience that the three share equal importance. The administrator must hone her human relations
skills in order to develop strong relationships and satisfy the needs of students, staff, and community.

Leadership style and communication style are directly related to an administrator's human relations skill level. A good administrator is aware of her style of leadership and communication and is able to adapt her style to the situation. Self-awareness inventories can be an effective method of determining leadership and communication style. Inventories completed by staff members or community members can provide feedback on public perception of an administrator's style. The Life Styles Inventory (Human Synergistics, 1989) that we were introduced to in the masters program could be used effectively as a self-awareness tool or as a perception inventory. The LSI provides feedback on effective as well as ineffective styles.

Sergiovanni (1995) takes the concept of human relations to a higher level when he delineates the differences between traditional leadership, human resource leadership, and bonding leadership. Under Sergiovanni's definition, "human resource leadership practices emphasize leadership styles, supportive climates, and interpersonal skills and rely on psychological linkages to motivate people to work by getting them to respond ultimately as self-actualizers" (p. 115). Bonding leadership, according to Sergiovanni, "emphasizes ideas, values, and beliefs and relies on moral linkages to compel people to work by getting them to respond as followers" (p. 115). Human resource leadership relies heavily on personal expertise and skill, while bonding leadership relies on moral values as the source of authority (Sergiovanni, 1995). I have found that I use human resource leadership skills more frequently with community and school board members, and I use bonding leadership skills more frequently with staff members.
The Principal As Evaluator

An administrator, as evaluator, must provide evidence of effectiveness or improvement in the school, staff and student. When evaluating the school, administrators solicit feedback from staff, students and community members through surveys, questionnaires, and personal communications. Administrators can also use checklists, reports, and collected data to provide evidence of school improvement. There is no easy method, however, to evaluate broad school reform efforts. Methods are not the only barrier to measuring school reform. Mitchell (1989) points out that “efficiency, equity, quality, and choice” (p. 60) are competing values to be considered when considering evaluation criteria. With these competing values in mind, administrators must use caution to avoid skewing evaluation results by overlooking one or more competing values.

Volumes of handbooks, workbooks, and resource guides refer to teacher evaluation, widely recognized as a major administrative function. Oftentimes, administrators are committed to using an instrument that has been designated by the school district’s master contract. In my present position, I am not required to administrate under such constraints. I develop formative evaluation tools with the cooperation of the teacher before I observe and evaluate. Frequently, I observe without evaluating. These impromptu observations provide me with much-needed information about teaching style, student chemistry, and curricular content. I have internalized Dr. Robert Decker’s (personal communication, summer 1996) advice, “catch them doing something good.” I make a point to give all of my staff members positive comments and notes each week.

Sergiovanni (1995) states that teacher evaluation and development go “hand in hand” (p. 212). When evaluation is viewed as a method of helping teachers grow and
developing their skills, much of the anxiety, stress, and antagonism associated with evaluation can be eliminated. I prefer to use a scale incorporated with the professional growth plan so that the teacher can indicate ways in which he/she learns best. Then, throughout the year, if a situation arises where a teacher's behavior or skill needs to be addressed, I can refer to the scale to help me determine the method by which the communication and remediation should occur.

Teacher evaluation also gives the administrator an opportunity to grow professionally. As new generations of teachers venture forth from the teacher training institutions, they bring with them new ideas of educational reform, instructional methods, and classroom management strategies. Through observation and evaluation, administrators can get a "fresh" look at the future of education. The future can present challenges as well as inspiration. Currently, I am researching "Generation X." One of my recently hired teachers displays many characteristics commonly associated with Generation X'ers. In order to fairly and effectively evaluate this teacher, I had to first gain insight to her personality and style. After a great deal of reading, I discovered that some of the miscommunications between us might be linked to the way we were raised and how we view authority (Filipczak, 1994). Observing and evaluating this teacher has caused me to expand my knowledge base and grow professionally.

The Principal As Conflict Mediator

Conflict mediation skills are essential to a successful administrator. Models for conflict resolution have been adopted for use in schools across the country. Regardless of the model, positive communication skills and active listening skills increase the likelihood of resolving the conflict peaceably.

Each day, administrators face a never-ending stream of conflicts and crises: student/student, student/teacher, student/staff, student/parent, teacher/staff,
teacher/teacher, teacher/parent, teacher/community member, parent/parent, parent/coach, and the list goes on and on. The participants involved in the conflict need to feel valued, and the administrator should always hear them out, so as not to devalue their position. Administrators must be aware of body language and verbal cues. By developing effective conflict resolution skills, the administrator is able to intervene in an expedient manner, freeing her schedule to address the other five roles of administration.

MY FUTURE AS A CHANGE AGENT

The potential of alternative programs to dramatically impact national educational reform efforts has been observed by many professionals with the establishment. William Pursell (1976) stated that “such programs may be the solution to keeping the public school system intact in America.” Neil Postman wrote, in The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalogue, “All of the reforms that will take place in education in the next decades will have their origins in the alternative school movement” (cited in Smith, Burke & Barr, 1974).

My administrative position at the alternative high school has afforded me opportunities to apply educational theory with few restrictions. Many alternative options began as experiments themselves, such as learning styles, flexible scheduling, team teaching, cooperative and community-based learning, individualized instruction, mentoring, and behavioral modification techniques.

My position at the alternative school has also provided me the opportunity to impact educational reform in other areas of the state and across the nation. As a board member for the Iowa Association of Alternative Educators, I am frequently called upon to assist local districts in establishing alternative programs and meeting the needs of their at-risk learners in order to comply with 280.19A of the Iowa Code. My successes
at the alternative school have resulted in opportunities for me to present at state, regional, and national conferences.

Whether I remain in alternative education or venture into the realm of conventional schools, one thing is certain: I have never -- not even for one minute -- regretted my decision to become an educator. In the last seven years, I have never wished to skip a single day of work. I love my job; I love my students; I love my colleagues; and I love learning.
References


In T.J. Sergiovanni and J.H. Moore (eds.), Schooling for tomorrow (pp. 40-61).

Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.


Cupertino. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan.


Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan Foundation.

Teasdale, S. (1920). There will come soft rains. Collected poems. New York: 

Macmillan Publishing Company.

Toner, P.R. (1993). Relationships and communications activities. West Nyack, 

NY: The Center for Applied Research in Education.