A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my experiences, beliefs and other influencing factors guiding me into an administrative career. I will share my personal characteristics including values, beliefs and philosophies and my own professional vision for quality education. I will close with my plan for assuring effective administrative practices.
PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Reflective Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Education

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

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The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my experiences, beliefs and other influencing factors guiding me into an administrative career. I will share my personal characteristics including values, beliefs and philosophies and my own professional vision for quality education. I will close with my plan for assuring effective administrative practices.

I can never remember a time in my life when I didn’t want to teach. After years of teaching neighborhood peers in a make-shift classroom in my parents’ garage, I sought to fulfill my passion. Twenty-one years later, I have no regrets.

Thus far, I have worked with students labeled with learning disabilities, mild mental disabilities, behavior disorders, emotional disorders, social inadequacies, medically fragile, a student who is deaf and students within the general education setting. I have designed programs for all grade levels across a variety of curricula and have taught in both self-contained and Renewed Services Delivery System (RSDS) education environments. I have experienced single grade settings, combination classes and multi-age groupings in a variety of general education settings for grade levels K-12. I have mentored new teachers, facilitated adults in studying and
implementing new research influencing educational change, taught staff members effective methods for solving conflict and facilitated a group of district administrators in a study group to learn more about effective leadership strategies.

My first teaching position was a learning disabilities (LD) assignment in an isolated classroom. The principal practiced a traditional style of leadership. I did what I was told and questioned nothing. I was proud of my first year's efforts because the parents and students liked me! I was sure I could teach anyone and, reflecting now, I believe that was my first educational philosophy.

My second and third years of teaching were in a small rural community closer to home. My class assignment was assisting learning disabled students in grades 5 - 12. Building leadership was a mix of traditional and dictatorial. Because of the dictatorial attitude toward students, parents and staff, I became a rebel. I found myself questioning the administrator about everything he did and becoming less tolerant of his motives, purposes and philosophies. It was apparent there was no student focus nor concern for staff relations, which was in direct contradiction of my own personal beliefs. I didn’t have
the wisdom or the experience to influence change so I decided to leave. One benefit of leaving was that I became more focused on my own philosophy. I was coming to realize that education should be student focused and student driven.

I considered those two years to be two of the worst in my professional career and thought it was because of the administration. As I think back, I now realize those years were very important in forcing me to analyze myself, my purpose and my education goals. I promised myself to never work in that type of dictatorial conditions again unless I could successfully force change. I was and am committed to putting children first and I felt an obligation to make sure my colleagues did and do the same.

My next experience led me out of the state but back into a rural setting. Twelve years in the same district afforded me a variety of opportunities at all grade levels across a variety of curricula. I saw many superintendents come and go as the system continued to be controlled by the school board and parent influence. Principals did as they were told, showed no initiative and provided no professional development. Their most clear expectation was that you "keep the parents happy".
I was good at that. It was here I got my first experience in leadership. As my parent support strengthened and my student achievement rose, I began to question, evaluate, and collaborate. I learned to become a risk-taker.

Collaboration amongst staff was discouraged so I felt pretty safe doing whatever I chose in my own room - with the door closed. Teaching, for me, became ‘on-the-job’ training. I practiced my ideas of good teaching through intuition about what was ‘good for kids’. Fortunately, Phase III dollars were granted to public schools during that time and I could begin to seek out my own professional development. I found it very enlightening to meet and share with other professionals. I began to do some personal networking. I attempted new practices based on seminars attended, as well as books and articles I had read. Through my own reading and collaboration with others outside my building, I began to form a vision for the type of teacher I admired and aspired to be. I learned to love the challenge of reaching every child and assuring they felt the thrill of learning. I began to share my philosophy with anyone who would listen. Unknowingly, others were beginning to follow my lead.
Eight years ago, I experienced a significant turning point in my career. A Cedar Rapids administrator, with an educational vision similar to mine, offered me a job. It was the first time, since beginning my career, I had an administrator who believed, supported and encouraged me. It was an experience I had longed for. With this administrator's encouragement and guidance, I began to shape my own leadership style.

I soon learned that teaching was so much more than lesson planning, student monitoring and parent conferences. I found myself mastering the art of compromise, learning from my peers, developing thematic units with other co-workers, teaching with my peers and watching more students make greater academic gains and displaying a higher level of independence for their own learning. Collaboration amongst staff was improving the efforts of all of us. People were interested in what I was doing and in what I had to say. I became more active in a variety of committees both within and outside the building. I was asked to undertake the challenge of peer coaching for brain compatible learning. I did some public speaking on behalf of the district. I was delegated to take
responsibility for administrative duties when the principal was away from the building. Even though I accepted each new challenge with reservation and sleepless nights, I enjoyed the level of confidence others had in me.

Through these experiences, the mentoring of effective principals with which I have worked, and the recent literature I have read, I have been able to validate many of my beliefs about what it takes to be an effective leader. These experiences combined with the information and collegial discussions I am having in my required university courses help me better understand what others expect of me. I am learning to understand some of the history, the confusion, the diversity and the characteristics of good leadership.

**Personal Characteristics**

Prior to my arrival in the Cedar Rapids School System, I never thought of myself as having effective leadership skills but I did know I had the characteristics of a good teacher. I soon came to the realization that both good teaching and good leadership characteristics are similar. As I prepare for a future in administration, I feel it is necessary to do some self-reflecting on my leadership skills thus far. I have always
maintained high expectations for myself, my students and my colleagues. To achieve those expectations, I model a good work ethic. I participate in various committees, attend workshops which keep me current on educational issues, initiate school-wide activities, lend assistance and support as needed, have had an in-class volunteer program, assist in seeking and writing grants, work many additional hours and continually seek feedback from peers, parents and administrators. Additionally, I exhibit a high level of energy and enthusiasm, read and discuss material related to my efforts, vary my professional experiences and practice life based on good ethics and values.

Throughout my 21 years in education I have experienced various academic, social and behavioral changes in the student populations we serve. Unfortunately, the student population in today's schools are enmeshed in a worsening problem of community violence. Schools are critical in promoting resilience and coping (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny and Pardo, 1992). Assuring the safety and learning of all children will require a better understanding of how children learn, new teaching strategies and additional support for the adults
responsible for education. I believe this can be accomplished if the staff is willing to provide a brain-compatible learning environment allowing for student input. For the purpose of this paper, I define brain-compatible learning as: natural learning stimulus based on the most current brain research. Susan Kovalik, in her book: ITI: The Model, suggests seven contributing factors in developing a brain-compatible learning environment: absence of threat, meaningful content, choices, adequate time, enriched environment, collaboration, immediate feedback and mastery which allows for learners to take ownership for their own learning (Kovalik and Olsen, 1994). In this type of environment, learners become intrinsically motivated after experiencing increased levels of respect and personal success.

Today's learners have experienced little respect throughout their young lives and therefore have no prior knowledge for what it is. I believe that lack of respect has led to an inability to accept responsibility and has resulted in moral decline throughout society. I believe that respect must be the foundation of design. According to Thomas Lickona, in Educating for Character, respect is the restraining side of
morality: it keeps us from hurting what we ought to value (Lickona, 1992). In order to get respect I must model respect. I believe it is time to stop laying blame and teach learners to like themselves and experience the feel of self worth. Building brain-compatible environments is a step toward achieving that goal. I will not tolerate lack of respect. I emphasize this with students, colleagues and parents.

As teachers move from isolation to participation, they become part of the power structure (Lashway, 1998). I believe it will be my responsibility to model, coach and encourage the staff to work collaboratively. Wise management and good interpersonal relationships combined with an emphasis on coaching of teachers are conditions that help secure a high level of competency (Sergiovanni, 1990). Together we, as a staff, will enhance our own skills by observing learning and questioning one another. Beverly Showers and Bruce Joyce (1996) state:

"Collaborative learning and data collection increase the time, and thus the cost, of staff development activities. To the extent that such activities result in greater clarity about means and ends, more thorough implementation of planned changes, and more immediate information about effects on students, the additional effort is well worth the investment." (p. 16)
Sergiovanni (1990) defines cultural leadership as "defining, strengthening and articulating enduring values, beliefs and cultural strands that give the school its identity over time." (p. 87) I believe that it will be my responsibility to learn the culture of the community in which I am employed. I will need to be visible within the community both academically and socially. This interaction will help me gain a deeper understanding for past practices, concerns both in and outside the building, increase communication and create a better balance for decision making. My intent will be to build a partnership between school personnel, families and community persons to work together toward a common vision.

I believe that in order to keep pace with societal and educational changes I will need to read, observe, question and engage in collegial discussions on a continuous basis. I will practice systematic self-reflection and seek input from my colleagues. According to William Glasser, in his book, *The Quality School*, effective leaders must engage the workers in discussions of the quality of work to be done and the time needed to do it. The leader must then model what is expected, assist workers in self-evaluation, and provide the best tools
and workplace for accomplishing their tasks (Glasser, 1992). Such practices will lead to teacher/student empowerment which will result in higher quality learning. Over time, by being appropriately self-critical, one can amass a repertoire of examined experiences that will provide the confidence needed to effectively direct the activities of school (Guthrie and Reed, 1991).

I will need time management skills in order to properly prepare the staff for implementation of effective programs. I will need to be watchful in budgeting, especially in the area of technology. I will have to gain an understanding of how people communicate as groups, both in and out of school. Stephen Covey (1991) emphasizes the importance of “seeking first to understand the intent of the communication without prejudging or rejecting the content.” (p. 116) It will be important for me to remain open-minded, especially when confronting those who disagree with my beliefs and/or practices. I must master the skill of active listening. Covey (1989) also emphasizes the importance of listening in order to be an effective communicator. “Listening involves patience, openness, and the desire to understand.” (p. 37) This can be accomplished by
giving time, being patient and openly expressing feelings. Effective communication skills will enhance my ability to be a strategic planner, allowing me to ‘think on my feet’. Seeking to see issues from another’s point of view will help me develop empathy. In addition to listening and seeking to understand, it will be necessary for me to possess good writing and speaking skills.

I must respect and be tolerant of diverse cultures by practicing team building and shared decision making strategies. It will be important to value the thoughts and ideas of all those involved in the educational process. It will be necessary to practice visionary, long-term thinking that will provide direction and engage the spirit of all those involved. Robert J. Kriegel (1990), in his book, *If it ain’t broke... Break it!*, states: “Conventional wisdom tells us that the leaders of the future must be creators, not responders. It is shaped by people with the vision, courage and wisdom to think beyond the boundaries of the known.” (p. 113)

Finally, I must begin each day with a positive attitude in order to take pride in a job well done. Self reflection on my own values will need to be on-going. Each new reading,
workshop, professional experience should drive me to continuously evaluate my belief system. I hope to strive to be a mentor to others as they, too, learn and embrace better strategies for teaching today's students. Mark Golin (1991), author of *Secrets of Executive Success*, states:

"There is much to be gained from mentoring. The department will grow stronger as people see a clear path upward. You will get a reputation for caring about people. And best of all, helping others to bring out their best will enrich your own work experience." (p. 311)

**Experiences**

The demands of education are continual. Unlike our forefathers, schools' efforts to solve society's ills of present-day, have failed. School leaders must seek out and use an empirical approach by implementing goal setting, collaboration, innovation, staff development, community involvement, shared decision making and on-going evaluation if they hope to impact change.

In our building, we became very concerned about the needs of students in our classrooms and the quality of their work. In our efforts to deal with our concerns, I encouraged my principal and colleagues to read the book *ITT: The Model* by
Susan Kovalik and Karen Olson (1994). The majority of the staff formed a study group to read, learn and implement strategies described in the book. The following summer we had the good fortune of being trained in the model by one of Susan Kovalik's associates. In the fall we began to implement pieces of the program school-wide. Each of us cleared out the clutter, put in lamps and plants and designed school-wide procedures for how we wanted students to act while at school. Our new goal was to immerse students in the 'real world' and teach them how to learn rather than what to learn. During the summer, working in grade-level teams, we designed thematic units which included a variety of 'hands on' activities, expert speakers and field trips. We redesigned our teaching methods - doing less for learners in the hopes of getting more. Exciting changes began to take place. The next year, we chose to enrich our program by reading, discussing and implementing brain-based research techniques as explained in Eric Jensen's book: Brain-Based Learning and Teaching (1995).

This study, application and evaluation had afforded me the opportunity to practice the collaboration I believe is so important to good education. I observed outstanding, exciting,
well-developed lessons occurring throughout the building, that related directly to the ‘real world’. The workplace developed into an environment of high morale, support, encouragement and reflection. Volunteerism increased. Parents became more actively involved with units of study. Learners began to take responsibility for their own learning! I was amazed to see learners of various abilities and disability ‘labels’ build community, work together, go beyond predetermined expectations, share a sense of pride, solve conflict and care for one another. I was proud to work beside teachers committed to meeting the individual needs of every learner while at the same time rekindling their own love for teaching.

Issues

There are numerous issues threatening the stability of traditional practices in education. Educational leaders of tomorrow will have to think differently. The future vision can no longer be driven by past practices. The exponential explosion of knowledge, technology and other factors contributing to change destroy any remaining hope and security that tomorrow will be a faster paced version of today (Patterson, 1995).
Identifying issues will be much easier than prioritizing them. Questions relating to those issues might include: How should we finance public education? Will vouchers become a reality? Can we truly keep children safe? Do we have the resources to encourage and support full inclusion? Should we teach values and if so, whose? Would year-round school better meet the demands of present-day family structures? How much will technology change the future of our graduates? Will an increase in technology really increase student outcome? How do we reduce the dropout rate? How do we get students to stop killing one another and themselves? What responsibility do we have in mentoring inadequate staff? What can brain research teach us about children and learning? What are the most effective strategies for developing a school-wide vision? How do we get staff, parents and community to support a common vision? How do we assist families medically, socially and financially?

Addressing all these issues would be impossible for one person in an isolated setting. The notion of the principal who acts as the all-knowing patriarch of the school and who wisely solves all problems is passe (Clark, 1995). To be effective, I
will have to constantly read, question, debate and become an advocate for those programs that have merit for developing learning environments that are child centered. I will need to value and learn from the successes of veteran staff, encourage collaboration and new learning, seek out and honor shared decision making, build community partnerships, adjust curriculum and develop on-going assessment which will assure collaboration and student achievement.

A friend of mine once shared with me that when we have answered all the questions in regard to effective education, it is time for us to get out of education because we've stopped asking the right questions! I face the future with a bit of hesitation but much determination. I have so much to learn and I'm sure I will always be questioning myself and others about why we do what we do.

**Vision**

Stephen Covey (1989) defines a mission statement as a personal constitution. It takes deep introspection, careful analysis, and thoughtful expression. It is something you will want to review regularly and change as the years bring new insights or additional changing circumstances. As stated
earlier, I first began to form my vision when I was a young child playing school in my parents’ garage. I have always wanted to teach and have always believed that all children can learn. These beliefs have not changed. Program requirements, experience and collaboration during the past 21 years has encouraged me to reevaluate and better clarify my vision of today.

My mission is to accept every learner, child or adult, as a gift from God. I will “lead by example” such lifeskills as respect, responsibility, integrity, patience, caring and sense of humor to assure that each learner will experience success. I will provide a learning environment conducive to learning and collaboration in order to instill a high level of self-confidence, pride and desire for learning by both staff and students. I will support and show appreciation for all members on the educational team. I will accept each new challenge as a learning experience for myself and begin each day with a positive outlook.

My vision is to coach teachers to have a better understanding of how children learn. Learning environments will become more brain-compatible.
Learners will maintain an enthusiasm for learning similar to the natural wonderment of a toddler. Students will care and respect themselves, other people and property. Staff members, parents and other community persons will work collaboratively to become actively involved in the responsibility of educating all children.

Plan of Action

In order to achieve my mission, I cannot limit myself to the attainment of a masters degree. I will continue to read, attend workshops and inservices, and question and evaluate educational programs. I will stay active with the legislature. I will seek out leadership styles I respect, develop a mentoring relationship, and study the lives of former leaders who have had a positive lasting impact throughout the world. I will expect and assure staff to do the same.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shared my reasons for seeking an administrative degree. I believe all of what I’ve stated is achievable and I know I can accomplish anything with the right mind-set. I know I possess the necessary skills to be an effective leader but feel I need to enhance and practice many
of those skills. I have earned a high level of respect from both administrators and co-workers, as evidenced through administrative duties within our building. I have earned the trust of my students and many of my parents as well as students and parents in other classrooms. I believe these accomplishments combined with my determination to be a lifelong learner will provide, for me, the foundation for becoming an effective administrator.
References


