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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Abstract
The role of an educational leader is constantly changing. The techniques of top-down leadership in schools today seem to have outlived their effectiveness. Bonstingl (1992), suggests that the Industrial Model (established by Frederick Winslow Taylor), in which management worries about quotas and quality while subservient workers fulfilled management’s request without questioning the overall plan involved in process, has stagnated school effectiveness and proven to be a barrier to school reform. In order for leadership to be effective in today's society it is essential that a paradigm shift is made from top-down strategies to strategies which involve more collaboration between the school administration, classroom teacher, and the community.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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As I reflect on my career as a professional educator, and on how I became interested in education, I continually see visions of people and events in the past that have shaped my life, my morals, and my career. As an elementary and middle school student no one would have believed I would become a teacher. And for some of them to perceive me in a role as an educational leader would have been something beyond their imagination. Quite simply, I was not the kind of student early on, that seemed to have much of a future in education, or anything else, for that matter. Then in the fall of my eighth grade year, something happened that forever changed my beliefs about school and about education in general. In that year a Social Studies teacher would take time out of his busy day and take an interest in me, a troublemaker, and try to help me become more responsible and caring toward my education, as well as, toward other people. It was this series of events that changed an angry young man into one who would see the value in helping others reach their potential, it was this helping hand that showed me the importance of an education and of the important work that teachers undertake. From that year forward I wanted to become an educator, so that someday I would have this type of an impact on young people.
Upon reflection, I can honestly say there were numerous individuals who took an interest in my life and helped me to develop into a responsible citizen and family man. It is difficult to say who, amongst all of these individuals, has had the most profound impact on my life. While I cannot point to each of these individuals specifically, I can say it was the care and love these people exemplified that showed me the value of community in developing responsible, caring young people.

As a high school student I was awakened to the idea that school can be an active and interesting place to learn. I was, again fortunate, to have high school teachers who were energetic and enthusiastic about teaching, and enthusiastic about the students whom they taught. There are three people from my high school experiences that began to shape who I am and what I am all about today. First, there was Mrs. Bolton who would work with me continuously on becoming a better writer. She helped me see the value of persistence accompanied by high expectations accompanied by the importance of being patient in producing an item of quality. Second, Mr. Peters, who demonstrated the value of storytelling in bringing history to life. Along with that he taught me the value of fairness by example. He is perhaps one of the fairest people I have ever known. Because he was so just, very few people had differences with him. Third, Mr. Bellamy my high
school science teacher and football coach, demonstrated the value of hard work in achieving your goals and the value of being a leader by example, rather than, by declaring yourself a leader.

At Cornell College I learned the value of a liberal arts education, and that everyone has the right to succeed as well as fail. At Cornell there were three people who help shape me into an effective educator and a person who some perceive as a leader. First, there was J. Barron Bremner, who took an interest in me as an individual. It was his encouragement and his criticism that guided me on a path toward achieving my collegiate goals in academics and athletics. Mr. Bremner taught me the value of writing encouraging notes to individuals who may be having a tough time or who fell short of their own expectations. Second, was my collegiate wrestling coach, Steven DeVries. He taught how to cope with adversity and to push harder when things seemed to be going wrong. Through his example I learned the importance of balancing family and career. Third, was Dr. Mel Hetland, whose level headed approach to education I found refreshing and realistic. He emphasized the importance of young people in education. If there was one thing you learned from his classes, it was that all in education should focus on enhancing the educational experience for the kids. That without the students there would
be no need for teachers or administrators; they should be center-stage in schools.

Throughout my relatively brief career as an educator I have been fortunate to have lived and worked in a variety of communities with relatively diverse populations. It is from these experiences that the importance of multicultural, nonsexist education became an emphasis in my teaching and curriculum development and will continue to be an emphasis of mine when I am employed in an administrative role in education. During these experiences I have observed the various leadership styles of superintendents and principals with whom I have worked. From these informal observations I have tried to model those behaviors I have found to be most effective and I have tried to avoid the behaviors which seemed to be the most counter-productive.

It has been to my advantage at Linn-Mar to have worked with Dr. Dale Monroe as our building principal. He has served as a positive role model for me to learn from. Dr. Monroe demonstrates the value of consistency as an administrator. It was through his encouragement that I decided to enroll in graduate school in order to get my administrative degree. Dr. Monroe exemplified to me many of the characteristics one must have in order to be an effective educational leader. He was fair, treating everyone as a colleague and working professional.
He was a model of quality teaching, approaching faculty meetings as a means to model quality teaching techniques. He was knowledgeable; he continually tracked new trends in education and being well read in them. His library of educational journals is available to anyone who wishes to utilize the literature. He served as a constructive administrator encouraging those around him to continue to improve themselves professionally. And he was decisive, he understood that ultimately someone had to make a decision and be willing to accept the responsibility that goes along with decision making.

As I reflect on my experiences in graduate school, I can see that some of my perceptions about the role of administrators and the mission of our nations schools have changed. But in most cases I feel that graduate school only reinforced the beliefs I have about schools and administration. I do not believe it was lectures and tests that enhanced my vision, rather, I believe it was the moments where professors, colleagues and students shared their perceptions regarding issues administrators will face that will, in the long-term be most beneficial to me as an administrator.

Of all the things stressed in the graduate program perhaps the most significant to me would be the need to maintain a library of current resources to utilize to make sound
educational decisions and policies in an academic institution. From my experiences as a graduate student I feel I have a solid foundation on which I may build a solid and effective leadership style in hopes that one day I will be a part of an effective school which will be due in part to the leadership style I will have to offer.

As I approach the end of my graduate study, I am beginning to develop a vision that I will take with me as a secondary principal. I find myself continually looking for information and ideas that will make me a more effective building administrator. I am continually analyzing the news in the high school in which I am employed, comparing and contrasting the decisions of the building administrators with the decisions I might have made in the same situations. Essentially, as I look back I find that I am the sum total of all my experiences and hopefully that equation will make me an effective, visionary secondary administrator.

Personal Characteristics

The big question for me, as I engage in the process of reflection, is: Who am I and what do I have to offer as an educational leader? As I answered the question I began to analyze the personal characteristics I possess searching for the characteristics that seemed to be best fit for a role in educational leadership. I have historically been in leadership
roles in one way or another since my early teen years. I believe I am a leader in many cases because of my work ethic. People generally know I will carry my share of the work load and they generally perceive me as someone they can count on to get things done.

One characteristic that helps me lead, when called upon to do so, is the fact that I am genuinely concerned about my profession and about the quality of education young people receive. The reasons for my becoming an educator supersede monetary motivation and I believe people understand that and know I am legitimate in my concerns regarding young people and their education. I find, upon reflection, that I am a people person, and I genuinely enjoy dealing with people from all walks of life. It is not that I am liked by everyone. This simply would not be possible for a true leader. It is inevitable that leaders will come into conflict with others over what they believe. According to Yatvin (1992), "Public schools are by the nature of their financing and governing systems loose assemblages of people with different purposes and different modes of operation." (pp. 50) I believe I possess the ability to deal with those conflicts in such a way as to make them win-win situations for all and use the resolution of conflicts to make the education that takes place even better.
I recognize that conflict in an open system of education is inevitable and from these conflicts, when managed appropriately, true and effective school transformation can take place. Snyder and Johnson (1992), believe if administrators today want to be effective lead-managers it is important that they develop a system of interaction and communication which utilizes conflict as a means for growth rather than a means of halting the process of school transformation. As a future administrator I recognize the potential conflict holds for bringing people together through collaboration to solve problems within the school. Conflict resolution through a process of shared decision making and collaboration is, in my mind, an essential way to build ownership among faculty and staff in the goals and missions of the school, while at the same time improving student outcomes.

Perhaps the most important personal characteristic I possess that will help me to be an effective administrator is that I am an educator, I cannot and will not lose sight of that aspect of myself. Often upon becoming a building principal or assistant principal building leaders get so wrapped up in the duties of the building and being the disciplinarian they forget they are in the profession of education and their primary mission is to educate (Dombart, 1992). As I indicated previously, from a very early age I have wanted to be an
educator and I have a great love and respect for the impact our schools have on young people. I understand that most behavior is learned and that some students must be taught the appropriate behavior before we can hold them accountable to behavioral expectation. It is my responsibility as a professional to ensure that we are demonstrating appropriate behaviors for student in order to allow them success in meeting the schools behavior expectations.

Vision

As a leader I believe it is important to have a firm understanding of ones self. I believe I have a personal vision for educational leadership based on my fundamental values, developed from my experiences as an educator, which I can relate to leading a secondary school. My vision, if not my mission, as a leader would be to affect positive change in individuals and within the educational organizations I am associated.

My vision is to lead with an open mind, putting my trust in my colleagues with whom I work. I can not presume to have all the solutions for the problems a school may face. It is imperative that I use the expertise offered by the professional educators with whom I work, in order to provide the best atmosphere within our building for learning. It is my vision to develop an atmosphere of empowerment by which the people
in the school feel they have an impact on events in the school and thus have ownership. If ownership in the school is not developed for the parents, students, faculty, and support staff then my leadership would be no different then any other top-down strategy. According to William Glasser (1992), if I want to be a lead-manager I must empower others around me and develop a sense of ownership in order to make the programs and policies of the school more relevant to those whom the school serves. I agree with Glasser and believe this to be true.

In order to be an effective leader an administrator must have a firm philosophy about the characteristics of an effective leader. The role of an educational leader is constantly changing. The techniques of top-down leadership in schools today seem to have outlived their effectiveness. Bonstingl (1992), suggests that the Industrial Model (established by Frederick Winslow Taylor), in which management worries about quotas and quality while subservient workers fulfilled management's request without questioning the overall plan involved in process, has stagnated school effectiveness and proven to be a barrier to school reform. In order for leadership to be effective in today's society it is essential that a paradigm shift is made from top-down strategies to strategies which involve more collaboration between the school administration, classroom teacher, and the community. Today's
leaders can no longer expect to give commands and have a rapid response as if they were working in the military. Blanton (1991) suggests, that today's leaders will have to develop techniques that will use the strengths of the organization and classroom teacher to develop more effective schools. In order for a leader to be able to use the strengths of the organization the leader must have a complete understanding of the organization, its function and its philosophy.

There are many leadership strategies an administrator can develop in order to increase organizational effectiveness. However, I believe, as does Mcleod (1992), that regardless of the strategy chosen by an administrator it is important to realize the key elements to successful management. It is my belief that for management to be successful it is important for future leaders in education to be able to work in an environment that focuses on establishing a purpose for schools at the consensus level. This means school leaders must be willing to accept the suggestions of others involved in the process of carrying forth the mission of schools. It is necessary to make our schools more connected in order for them to be more effective. Melvin(1991), believes once the mission is established at the consensus level the school leader should develop a systematic approach in accomplishing its mission. In
working through the system school leaders can clarify a process for creating effective quality schools.

School leaders should also become role models for quality as well as teachers of quality (Glasser, 1992). For Glasser (1992), the emphasis on leadership today and in the future should focus on the elimination of coercive techniques; becoming lead-managers as opposed to boss-managers. School leaders can no longer attempt to cram innovative teaching methods or educational philosophies down the throats of the faculty and expect the faculty to swallow (Rhodes, 1990). Contrarily, leaders must implement techniques such as consensus building, team building, site-based management and others if they wish to develop effective schools in today's world. As Scholtes (1988) states, "the way to go about creating quality is not in the manner of the bulldozer; rather, you can accomplish transformation in the manner of the boll weevil; patiently and persistently, inch by inch, and row by inexorable row" (p. 46). Essentially, the more internal coordination a leader can develop the more of a lead manager they will become (Glasser, 1992).

If the elements of successful school leadership are developed by educational leaders in an era of school choice, Stone (1992) confers that the leaders will become lead-managers of quality schools which will become competitive
with any surrounding community. Under these circumstances it is essential that school leaders work to build a consensus with the faculty and community as well as the state legislature, as to what the mission and philosophy should be. Communities today are more closely scrutinizing schools. Stedman (1993), believes it is no longer possible for the school to function as a separate entity from the community. It is essential that schools begin, if they have not already done so, to involve the community in the decision making process. After all, the schools do belong to the community.

One of the biggest frustrations facing administrators, teachers and communities today is trying to make sense out of the various reform movements that are taking place in our nation today. It is not that school reform and school transformation are, in and of themselves new concepts. Ever since there have been public schools, educators and communities have been attempting to make schools better, more effective, and more in touch with the needs of communities and industries that surround them (Goodlad, 1992). The problem rests with the origin of most movements. According to Moore (1993), most school reform strategies or transformational school philosophies come from some region of the country that to many local communities seems like a foreign land. Since this is true there seems to be a great deal of
misunderstanding in various communities and amongst faculties as to what the reformers are trying to accomplish. After listening and participating in countless discussion about this issue in some of the graduate courses, it seems this issue will be one of great concern to a future administrator. Look, for example, at the concern created by certain conservative groups about Outcomes Based Education. A sound educational philosophy in many people's eyes was basically stopped in its tracks.

Challenges

Administrators are going to run across numerous barriers to reform efforts in our schools. One of those barriers is misunderstanding or misinformation. Communities often misunderstand what schools are trying to accomplish through reform efforts. It is important in these cases that as an administrator I keep open channels of communication between the school and community. This is why it is of the utmost importance to have an effective school and community relations plan in order, to avoid misunderstanding about what the school is trying to accomplish.

A second barrier to school improvement and reform, that I believe a future administrator must be aware of, is some of the assumptions reformers make about schools and educators are not essentially correct or even truthful for that matter. One
of the assumptions driving the reform movement is in regard to motivation. As Moore (1992) points out, most reformers base their strategy on the belief that administrators, educators, and students are externally motivated, rather than driven intrinsically. The assumption here is without merit. It suggests that without some sort of reward system in place teachers and students would not be driven toward quality instruction and achievement (Clark & Astuto, 1994). It suggests that people must be pushed into doing quality work.

As an administrator, I believe, it is essential to understand that this assumption held by reformers creates a natural tension that will stand as a barrier between reformers and educators. Clark and Astuto (1994), believe this assumption is one of the primary reasons for the frequent failure of school reform efforts. They believe, as I do, there must be a shift in this paradigm in order for teachers to take an active and productive role in educational reform. Their contention is based on the evidence they discovered through research that clearly indicates that to continue doing more of the same will not be adequate.

I believe if you want to be a successful administrator in an era of school reform you must have faith in the abilities of your faculty and community. It will be essential for successful reform efforts to be driven by the teachers, community, and
lead-managers, rather than driven by some outside expert generally unfamiliar with the community environment. According to Rhodes (1990), if this is true, it will become more and more important for educational leaders to loosen the reins of bureaucratic control over schools, and allow for more decision making teams of school board members, teachers, community members, and students. When this thinking is fostered by educational leaders, schools will begin engaging in meaningful grass-roots reform that will make the school more effective and provide a community with ownership of the school, which in Count's (1992) view, will only serve to make it a stronger institution of education.

Educational reform is just one of many issues facing future and present school administrators. As a future administrator I will have to deal with issues of diversity, inclusion, due process, and equity. In an era when we have more single parent homes than ever before schools are asked to do more than just educate. Quite often schools are expected to meet the complex social and emotional needs of their students. As Guthrie and Reed (1991) indicate, today more schools than ever before are collaborating with other agencies in order to provide services to the students with special physical, emotional, and social needs. As we deal with the various needs of the students we, in education, must work even
harder to provide the students with an education that will enable them with the skills necessary for survival in the twenty-first century (Schargel, 1991). Considering the increased demands on schools this will be no easy task.

So, what are the challenges of the new generation of students entering into public schools? Which of these challenges must schools focus on to make education more meaningful to the students? How do we cope with a changing society and the new challenges the changes will bring? These are just a few questions I have asked myself throughout my program of graduate studies. It seems every time we rise up and meet the new challenges faced by schools and students, even more new challenges arise that place an even heavier burden upon public schools. Or, it seems that some new challenges bring even greater demands on schools. If gangs become a problem then the likelihood is that drugs, violence and the need for conflict resolution will rise up as issues to be dealt with in schools (Burke, 1991). It seems as if there is a never ending cycle issues and challenges schools will have to face. It is important that as an administrator, I am able to cope with these challenges in a way that will allow the school to continue in its mission with very few interruptions.

Perhaps there will be no greater challenge for future administrators than that of creating schools that adequately
deal with the growing diversity of population in the United States. Research indicates a change must be made in order to make education more equitable to all. Accordingly, changes must be made in schools in order to allow this to happen. Changes in how teachers perceive students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, changes in instructional approaches providing more classrooms in which strategies develop an atmosphere through which people of a diverse population can work together. Changes in educational settings which can allow for students to feel safe and providing the adequate resources for schools to provide a meaningful education to its students. Changes in teacher education programs which provide for more educational strategies in dealing with a more diverse population, and possible changes in the ethnic and racial diversity of teachers in this country (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As an administrator I must continually work to eliminate inequities in the educational setting. This will require continual awareness on my part in seeking out and eliminating practices within the school which can inhibit student learning.
References


