A personal professional vision for elementary principalship: a reflective essay

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Abstract
The business of running public schools to prepare our youngsters to be productive members of society is a very complex task. It is not enough to simply have a vision based on values and beliefs, but one must also possess the necessary skills to transform that vision into reality. Dr. Lorraine Monroe, a successful leader in the field of educational leadership, sums this up by saying, "Most important is that the leader continue not only to believe in the dream and the need to pursue it but also to do the hard brain work of never doubting its importance," (Monroe, 1997, p. 32).

It is with this goal in mind that I will first examine my values and beliefs and determine how they will help guide my work as a school leader. I will then examine the knowledge and skills that I believe will be necessary for me to provide effective leadership. Finally, I will articulate my personal professional vision for administrative practice based on a synthesis of my values and the knowledge I have gained through my study of educational leadership.
A PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL VISION FOR ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALSHIP

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Determining just what is an effective leader and what beliefs and values one must hold and exhibit to be an effective leader may be a list of standards that at times seems unattainable for any one individual. It is the challenge of striving to exhibit such standards that motivates people to become effective leaders. As a building principal, I will be charged with carrying out the vision and mission of my school district. With the challenges facing the success of today’s public education, I must be firm in what I believe and value as a principal and professionally carry out my beliefs. I must also bring to the profession the knowledge and skills that will allow me to be an informed and effective administrator. The business of running public schools to prepare our youngsters to be productive members of society is a very complex task. It is not enough to simply have a vision based on values and beliefs, but one must also possess the necessary skills to transform that vision into reality. Dr. Lorraine Monroe, a successful leader in the field of educational leadership, sums this up by saying, “Most important is that the leader continue not only to believe in the dream and the need to pursue it but also to do the hard brain work of never doubting its importance,” (Monroe, 1997, p. 32). It is with this goal in mind that I will first examine my values and beliefs and determine how they will help guide my work as a school leader. I will then examine the knowledge and skills that I believe will be necessary for me to provide effective leadership. Finally, I will articulate my personal professional vision for administrative practice based on a synthesis of my values and the knowledge I have gained through my study of educational leadership.
Values and Beliefs

Belief One

I believe first and foremost a building principal must be an ethical leader. If you do not display a sense of ethics, it will be very difficult to carry out any of the other work that must be done in order to ensure quality education for our students. You must serve as a model to the staff, the students, and the community in regards to who you are as a person and as a professional.

As an ethical leader you must model honesty. Honesty is important in promoting open dialogue and conversation. Without that, we cannot move forward in our work nor can we problem solve and seek solutions that have positive impact on our students. Honesty leads to trustworthiness, which is an essential component of ethical leadership. Stephen Covey who has done much research and has written about habits of highly effective people states, “Trust—or the lack of it—is at the root of success or failure in relationships and in the bottom-line results of business, industry, education, and government,” (Covey, 1990, p. 31).

Ethical leaders must model courage and support. We must be champions for public education, for our staff, our students, our families and our community. We need to radiate this positive energy by being optimistic, hopeful, and believing. We can help build others confidence in themselves and in our schools by exemplifying a positive self-fulfilling prophecy through our own courage and support.

As an ethical leader we must be committed and stand up for our convictions. We must believe in ourselves and in other people. We must be true to who we are and what we are
about and remember that ultimately our decisions are based upon what is best for students.

The power of modeling cannot be underestimated. I firmly believe that it is my responsibility to model ethical leadership. By doing so I can be part of providing an educational environment for children that embraces compassion and social justice and creates a deep sense of a caring school community.

Belief Two

I believe that schools must have a vision, a mission, and goals for working towards attainment of our vision and mission. We need to have a road map that speaks to what we are about and where we are going. No one is served well if we attack education and our day to day work in a haphazard way. Our vision, our mission, and our goals drive our educational progress, plan and actions. Without these we are shooting in the dark.

I believe if the vision, mission and goals are to be realized I must involve all of the stakeholders to create a sense of ownership and to build commitment. “Processes and structures that encourage interactions among parents, community members, and local professionals crystallize shared concerns and mobilize people to action,” (Bryk and Sebring, 2000, p. 442). The challenges in education are too great to go it alone. I will embrace the wisdom of others.

Our work in this area is never done. It is cyclical. Our efforts must be continually monitored and evaluated for effectiveness as a basis for determining future work. We must continually strive for excellence. If I provide visionary leadership I can be part of a school that shows excellence in student achievement.
Belief Three

I believe one of the most important roles the principal is responsible for and will continue to be responsible for is in the area of instructional leadership. A great deal of emphasis is being placed upon our schools to show an increase in test scores. The American public has a general dissatisfaction with our schools. Principals must provide the kind of instructional leadership that will lead to student achievement and gain back the public's confidence in our educational system. Boyd goes as far as saying, "Effective and high achieving schools depend most on capable instructional leadership from principals," (Boyd, 1996, p. 66).

Principals must learn along side teachers about instructional strategies and practices that lead to student success and achievement. Principals must provide the leadership, the resources, and other necessary supports that allow teachers to learn about, implement and refine best practices in their classrooms. Stephen Covey says, "Principle centered people are constantly educated by their experiences. They read, they seek training, they take classes, they listen to others, they learn through both their ears and their eyes," (Covey, 1990, p. 33).

If I am to expect teachers to become proficient as instructional leaders in the classroom, I too must be an instructional leader. In order to do this I must stay connected with the classroom. I see this as crucial to providing teacher satisfaction and increased student achievement. There are many in the field who view the principal as the key. "The effective schools movement has most often described the successful principal as the key to the school, the instructional leader, the person who knows what effective
instruction looks like, how to evaluate it, and how to help teachers improve their instruction,” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies, 2000, p. 19).

Belief Four

In order for a school to operate smoothly there must be a high degree of organizational leadership. The principal must ensure that all of the pieces fit and work together to fulfill the common goal. The day-to-day operations must be attended to so the ultimate goal of student learning can be achieved. “If kids can have one place in their daily lives where there is order and stability and where worthwhile activities are going on, then there is a high possibility that their lives can be transformed for the better,” (Monroe, 1997, p. 125).

I believe the principal can positively affect the school climate with their ability as an organizational leader. Educating children is difficult enough for teachers without them having to worry about the extrinsic factors that affect the school climate and student learning. As a principal, I want to be a leader in providing a safe, efficient and effective learning environment for the students and staff.

Belief Five

No man is an island and this certainly applies to school leadership. The diverse needs of our students, families and communities command the need for collaborative leadership. Principals cannot effectively lead and meet the needs of our constituents alone.

Principals must foster a sense of community, so responsibility for educating our youth is shared by all. Collaborative leadership is, “One that fosters voluntary commitments,
develops a sense of empowerment, is results-focused, and relies less on rule enforcement and compliance,” (Lawson, 1999, p.14).

As a principal, I will orchestrate community involvement and support to provide a comprehensive program at my school to meet the diverse needs of the students. I will seek opportunities to form partnerships between the school and the community.

Belief Six

I believe political leadership poses the greatest challenge for principals today. Principals are expected to do it all and often times are faced with unfair and unrealistic expectations and demands. It is a delicate balance between humanistic concern and political pressure. Often times decisions are based on policy, law and regulations without looking at individual needs and circumstances.

With political pressures being what they are, I will not view this as a them against me situation. Rather I will seize the opportunity to work within the political structure to ensure dialogue with representatives of diverse community groups to provide quality education and to keep the lines of communication open with decision-makers outside the school community. Political leadership provides a great opportunity to gain the necessary supports for the staff, students, and families of our schools. Monroe believes we have a real opportunity as educators. She states, “Schools should not reflect what society is, but rather schools should model what society should be, (Monroe, 1997, p. 193).
Belief Seven

I believe there are certain inherent qualities that a person must possess to be an effective leader. Too much or too little of certain qualities can hinder one’s performance as an effective leader. I believe one of the most important qualities is showing humanistic concern. Effective principals show an interest in people and are able to provide the right amount of encouragement for improvement. I believe principals must have an interest in and a commitment towards interpersonal contact. Principals must be socially skilled. An effective principal must have a sound feeling of self worth and cannot be continually worried about what others think. For me this will be a personal challenge. I recognize that my decisions will not always be popular, and I must be willing to stand by my beliefs and convictions as they relate to what is best for students. Principals must not be too dependent, must not be too defensive and must not seek self-worth by exercising control and dominance. I believe there is no room for these qualities in providing a caring school community. Finally, I believe an effective principal shows a strong desire to attain high quality results on whatever endeavors they are involved in and are self-actualized by becoming everything they’re capable of being.

Knowledge and Skills

Ethical Skills

One of the first things that principals need to have knowledge of is themselves. It is important that you know your strengths and weaknesses. By using the Life Styles Inventory, I was able to reflect upon what makes me think the way I do. I also was able to see how my perceptions of myself and other’s perceptions of me relate. Based on what
I have learned from this experiences, I believe effective leaders need to possess skills that allow them to be sensitive to others needs. Principals need good listening skills and strategies to coach and counsel others. Effective principals need to build problem-solving skills and be able to ask insightful questions that help others to reflect and grow. Kenneth Hinton, an elementary principal, has learned much about this from his experiences. “Hinton views the principalship as a nurturing role. Hinton said that persons who work with children need to know they are loved, respected and cared for before they can really make an impact on the lives of children,” (Lyman, 2000, p. 102).

I spent a great deal of time this past year serving as a mentor to a first year teacher. Although I was able to provide her with guidance and support in many areas, it was the fact that I cared about her as a person and about her success as a teacher that had the most impact that first year. Principals must possess human relation skills to be effectual, which is reflected in the following statement by Lyman (2000):

> Caring leadership builds a learning community that includes everyone involved with a school. From a variety of disciplines, scholars are suggesting directly or by implication that the presence or absence of caring affects, and some say determines, the degree of learning in schools. (p. 11)

**Visionary Skills**

A premature vision or one that is not shared by all stakeholders will never be realized. Therefore, it is essential that principals understand the process involved in creating a shared vision. Principals must be skilled at facilitating the development of a shared vision, and be able to articulate and implement the vision. In this arena it is said of these principals, “That they are visionary, change agent, and expert at dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty are often descriptive attributes employed when defining
quality leadership,” (Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies, 2000, p. 20). In addition, principals must have knowledge of the change process and be able to manage people through it. They need to understand that change is not an event rather an ongoing process. It is important to recognize that change takes time and for many of their faculty, change is a highly personal experience. I was involved in changing the school hours at my building this year. While teachers were asked for their input initially, in the end they felt as if the decision were handed down without regard for their feelings. This affirmed by beliefs about the skills needed for visionary leadership. Principals need to be adept at involving all of the stakeholders so that the vision and the implementation of it is shared and supported by the entire school community. This is reflected in the following statement by McAdams (2000):

The reality is that unless teachers and principals are at the center stage of any restructuring efforts, and unless they buy into and are trained for the new structure, the effort will fail. Those who will be most affected by restructuring must be involved in designing the new structure and changes must be implemented in careful stages. (p. 9)

**Instructional Skills**

Principals need to have a solid background in effective instructional practices so they can provide the kind of leadership that will impact student achievement. I was recently asked by the Assistant Superintendent of my school district why I thought test scores were on the rise at my school. I firmly believe that the single biggest factor that has positively impacted our test scores is the instructional leadership that the principal has provided. There has been a shift in the focus of leadership roles from being that of a manager to that of an instructional leader. “Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are
at the heart of creating and sustaining a learning community where the act of teaching all students how to learn, think, and solve problems is central to the real work of the school,” (Speck, 1999, p. 130). If this is the real work of our schools, then principals must first be knowledgeable about curriculum. Principals need to ensure that the faculty has knowledge of the curriculum frameworks and that they are involved in curriculum development and review. Secondly, principals need to have knowledge of effective instructional practices. Principals need to know what effective classroom management looks and sounds like and support that in their buildings. Principals need to be knowledgeable about effective teaching practices such as those that teach students to think, solve problems, communicate clearly, work collaboratively in groups, and apply their cognitive skills to everyday problems. When providing instructional leadership, principals must possess knowledge about the diverse needs of our learners. This is summed up in a statement by Thomas, Fitzhugh-Walker, and Jefferies (2000):

Teaching and learning activities must be designed to ensure the success of all students, at every rung of society’s ladder. Each rung is important to our society’s continued growth and success. We need individuals prepared to do their jobs successfully at each rung of the ladder if our society is to continue to grow strong and remain secure. (p. 17)

Practical experience has also taught me the value of technology and the role it plays in education. “The principal’s understanding of the many facets of technology is critical as schools prepare students for the twenty-first century,” (Speck, 1999, p. 191). Principals need to be skilled themselves at using technology as well as have an understanding of technology planning and its relationship to instruction. One of the areas where I have utilized technology in a leadership role is in gathering and analyzing data. As part of
the team who had developed the Building Improvement Plan, we have had to look at our existing data to make decisions as well as come up with ways to gather additional evidence to show that our goals and objectives are being met. Technology allows us to efficiently gather and look at data in a variety of ways that have great impact upon our work. “Schools that analyze and utilize information about their school communities make better decisions about not only what to change, but how to institutionalize systemic change. Schools that use data understand the effectiveness of their reform efforts-those that do not, can only assume that effectiveness.” (Bernhardt, 1998, p. 1). Consequently, principals need to be knowledgeable of assessment practices that lead to accountability for student progress and achievement. One of the greatest pressures that principals are faced with today is raising high stakes test scores. Principals have to embrace the whole notion of accountability that the public is demanding. While it seems intrusive and intimidating at first glance, there is real merit in accountability. “No other reform during my years on the board did more to improve school performance. School accountability drove accountability upwards and downward through the system,” (McAdams, 2000, p. 83). Principals are in a position to gain the confidence of their community by holding themselves, the teachers, and the students accountable for progress and attainment of the curriculum. I have come to understand through numerous conversations that teachers within my setting perceive issues of accountability and high-stakes testing in different ways. I have watched my mentor gain support for the importance of accountability as it relates to instruction and standards. She has had to help teachers see and accept new paradigms. One way that this has happened is through her support, guidance, and
knowledge as an instructional leader. Teachers need to see the principal as a source of support and assistance in meeting the challenges of accountability for increased student learning and achievement as evidenced by assessment. Principals can assist teachers by helping them build competence which in turn builds commitment. "Teachers’ confidence in their own professional abilities will allow them to expect their students to learn well and to successfully meet higher assessed standards." (Kaplan and Owings, 2001, p. 15).

If principals are to help build this confidence, they must be knowledgeable about instructional best practices. In addition to possessing this kind of knowledge, principals have to be keenly aware of what is happening in classrooms. My mentor is visible daily in every classroom. She participates in teaching lessons, so she has first hand experience when she talks with teachers. Principals must regularly observe teachers and engage in conversations with staff about instructional practices and student learning. It is through this dialogue and reflection that teachers will grow professionally. Principals need to be catalyst for helping teachers think about instructional excellence. The opportunity for reflection has been embedded throughout this leadership program. It is by having this opportunity, that I have realized the power and benefits of reflection. “Through reflection, real growth and therefore excellence are possible. By trying to understand the consequences of actions and by contemplating alternative courses of action, teachers expand their repertoire of practice.” (Danielson, 1996, p. 106).

In order for learning to take place, we must have competent caring teachers. After listening to what students had to say, “They (teachers) were the people who had the largest impact on the quality of students’ educational experiences,” (Corbett and Wilson,
2001, p, 32). When interviewing my mentor she stated that her biggest concern as an administrator is her ability to hire competent teachers in light of the shortage. Principals need to recognize the fact that it is not the building that makes a school but rather the people. Lyman (2000) states, "However, having explored these features of the physical setting, one has only described the underpinnings of the caring environment, only glimpsed its energy, personality, spirit, milieu, and atmosphere. More important that the building are the people," (p. 53). This points out the fact that principals need to be very concerned with who they hire. If it is the responsibility of the principal to staff their schools with teachers who positively impact students' lives both socially and academically, then principals will have to know what makes an effective teacher when interviewing. Principals will have to be skilled at interviewing and recognizing competent teachers. Principals have to be able to see beyond the surface. It was found after interviewing students that, "Personal style affected how likable a teacher was; instructional style determined how effective the teacher was," (Corbett and Wilson, 2001, p. 61). Instructional leadership is a very large responsibility that principals must be ready to undertake if they are to have effective schools.

Organizational Skills

Organizational leadership will require that principals be knowledgeable about several aspects of the day-to-day operations of a school. Principals will be required to maintain a safe and orderly environment. In addition, principals will need to have knowledge of school budgeting processes and be able to allocate school resources efficiently. Current practicing principals were asked to speak to our class about several topics. Not one
principal volunteered to talk about budgeting and finance issues. My mentor has relayed to me that this is something you have to dig and do; that it is very much an experiential learning process. Resources seem to be very tight these days, and many schools have sought additional resources through the acquisition of grants. I feel that principals will need to be skilled at grant writing to help secure additional funds for their schools. A final comment in this area as noted by my mentor, is that she feels too often much of her day is taken up with organizational issues. This points out to me the need to have sound operational procedures that are carefully thought out and well implemented.

Collaborative Skills

Principals need to be skilled at working cooperatively in teams with in depth knowledge of how to structure working teams. This would include negotiation strategies, conflict resolution strategies, and strategies in confrontation when necessary. After working in a team using a problem-based learning model, I feel there is great value with this approach when working on site-based issues. "A lot of good can come from rational problem solving. And we humans are problem solving animals," (Aronson, 2000, p. 7). It is important too, that everyone is involved from the ground up to build ownership and accountability. In order to promote collaboration, principals must empower teachers to lead and be part of shared decision making. I would not be an aspiring future administrator had my principal not given me opportunities to lead. Principals must understand the importance of treating teachers as professionals. Collaboration also creates educational environments that are conducive to learning. "It is the quality of the relationships in the classrooms that determines the educational value of the setting,"

You can sense what kind of learning environment is within a school as you walk into the door. A principal needs to help create a community of learners. This needs to be modeled by the principal and by the staff. "It is not only what students do, it is important what we teachers do (not what we preach, but what we practice)," (Aronson, 2000, p. 171). Students need to see their role in this community also as they are taught to work collaboratively. "Students discover the humanity and the beauty of their classmates not because a teacher lectures them about the essential brotherhood of man or the importance of being nice to one's peers, but through their own actions and experiences," (Aronson, 2000, p. 170). Finally, in order to truly embrace collaboration, principals must involve parents and the community and invite them to be partners in the learning process at school, at home, and in the community. I believe that parents are our greatest allies in reinforcing the work of the school. Principals need to be skilled at working with parents. Very powerful relationships can be built. In speaking of reform efforts McAdams (2000) found the following:

If there is a hero in my story, it is the PTO mothers (and fathers). Unlike all the other players, they had only one agenda: children. These PTO mothers made schools successful. They demanded effective teaching, high academic standards, and strong leadership. (p. 61)

When talking with my superintendent about his expectations for employees in this district, he stated that customer satisfaction is a high priority. Our community, our parents, and our students are our customers. If they are to be satisfied, they must be involved as partners.
Political Skills

School Governance and Law and Special Education Law have given me a knowledge base and an appreciation for the importance of legal issues as they relate to schools. It is important that principals have a thorough understanding of district policies and procedures. In addition, principals need to stay current with issues related to school law. Issues that principals must be knowledgeable about include due process, freedom of expression, student discipline, records, and tort liability. Knowledge is power and principals need to use their knowledge to avoid or at least limit their risk of being involved in litigation. Many cases are brought against school districts involving negligence, employee-related issues, and special education issues. Like it or not, schools are often in the middle of the political arena. McAdams (2000) found the following to be true after serving on the Houston Independent Schools Board of Education:

Schools are where all the ills and divisions of American society are put under a looking glass. Schools are where many of the racial issues that divide America are most sharply focused. Schools are big business. Schools cost the taxpayers a lot of money. And school people, like all people, have personal and group interests that powerfully influence behavior. (p. 260)

Principals need to be knowledgeable to make informed decisions. They need to respond to trends, issues and changes in the environment. Principals must continue to deal with every increasing diverse community groups. And, principals must continue responding to increasing and ever changing policies, laws, and regulations.

Personal Professional Vision for Administrative Practice

I want to be a leader who models courage, honesty, trust, and support. I want it to be apparent to all with whom I work that I am committed to achieving excellence. I want to
be able to bring out the best in others and instill confidence. I envision myself leading by example. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders has developed standards that are the heart and soul of effective leadership. The standards place special emphasis on vision and promoting the success of all students.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (1996) state:

Effective school leaders are strong educators, anchoring their work on central issues of learning and teaching and school improvement. They are moral agents and social advocates for the children and the communities they serve. Finally, they make strong connections with other people, valuing and caring for others as individuals and as members of the educational community. (p. 5)

In order to ensure well-trained school administrators throughout the state of Iowa, a 35-member Steering Committee recommended to adopt the ISLLC standards for school leaders with some minor modifications. As a result of this committees work, the Iowa Standards for School Administrators was developed. My leadership training and my involvement in practicum experiences has helped prepare me to meet these standards. I envision myself embracing and exemplifying each of these standards in my day-to-day work as a principal. I want to be an integral part in carrying out the vision of my school district. It is through my work as a principal that I want to help all students be successful in mastering the lifelong learning skills and attitudes that will equip and empower them to take a proactive role in our rapidly changing society.

Conclusion

It is the unique challenges and opportunities that being a building principal will afford me that draws me to this position. The various leadership roles and responsibilities that I
have outlined will all be important to me as a school leader because they are all so intertwined. Caddell and Malone (2000) state:

The recruitment of outstanding individuals to serve as principals has become a challenging task for superintendents and school boards, largely because the principal’s job is so demanding. The principal is expected to be a manager, instructional leader, motivator, lay psychologist, and public relations expert. (p. 162)

There will be a chance to wear many hats, to affect many lives and to provide the kind of leadership that will yield results for years to come. I look forward to being a leader of leaders.
References


