A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: a reflective essay

Rex C. Kozak
University of Northern Iowa
Abstract
Teachers and principals need to work cooperatively to evaluate programs and make suggestions for the betterment of the students. The principal needs to involve the faculty, parents, community, and businesses to help develop a long-lasting relationship between the school and the outside world. Above all, it is absolutely necessary for administrators to cultivate trust, confidence, integrity, and moral responsibility within the school. If I can create opportunities for educators to feel good about themselves, they will pass this feeling on to students and then into the community. By embracing these components of effective leadership, effective schools will result.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS;

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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Rex C. Kozak

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Dave Else

5-31-02
Date Approved
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Victoria L. Robinson

6-3-02
Date Approved
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

6-3-02
Date Received
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
As I reflect upon becoming an educator, I find myself reminiscing about the people who shared in forming my values and vision. It was a group of people who through their thoughts and actions motivated me into becoming a teacher and continuing my education to become an administrator. Over the years I have gathered many thoughts, feelings, and emotions about education and my role as an educator. I have molded my style of leadership from those around me who I thought were effective teachers, leaders and great role models.

I first looked back to my parents who both shared in giving me something unique and special. Growing up in an agricultural community the youngest of ten children, I was blessed with learning the lessons of life in their purest fashion. My father taught me a strict work ethic of doing things right and not questioning authority. My mother taught me patience, understanding, and a love for the simple things in life. My parents always treated me with respect and taught me that the only way one gets respect is to give respect. The other thing that I learned from my parents was that everything in this world can be taken away except that which one has learned. Education was important to my parents and they encouraged all of their children to achieve in their academic studies. I am also indebted to my teachers that taught me the
importance of making a difference in someone’s life. My first lesson about making a difference was taught to me by Mrs. Jane Elliot, my third grade teacher. In Mrs. Elliot’s class I was taught about racism and respect by being in the film “The Eye of the Storm” (Peters, 1970) also know as “A Class Divided” or “Brown Eyes/Blue Eyes”. It was from this film that I learned so much about being labeled and a need to help make a difference in this world for everyone that I would come in contact with. As i continued going through junior high and high school.

I learned the importance of being an educator and how important teachers were in students lives. As I went through the party years it was my teachers and coaches that made me stop and think about my actions. They taught me lessons about our society and the need for balance and understanding in all matters. Mr. William Dietrich, my high school principal, gave me the motivation to someday be an administrator. I was so impress at how he worked with the staff and students to ensure that quality education was taking place in his building. Mr. Dietrich taught me how to have fun and relate to staff and students, but to maintain a level of professionalism that was respected by all. Mr. Dietrich was a person that loved to laugh and made you feel like you were his own, yet he made sure that you followed the rules. At the college level, I was greatly impacted by Professor Howard Jones, College
of History at University of Northern Iowa, who taught me the love of knowledge. Professor Jones was my advisor in my undergraduate studies and he stressed upon me the importance of making learning personal to all of my students in the classes I would someday teach. His confidence in me and his willingness to teach me various lessons gave me the needed direction.

I would love to say that the readings and lectures I have received over the past twenty years in my formal education have formed my beliefs and values, but I would be lying. I have learned most from those who have shared something special in their lives with me. I have observed their effective behaviors and the passion that motivates them in their jobs. Graduate school has been of little use in the sense of learning something. My experiences have helped solidify the foundation from which I draw my strength. I will continue to be a life long learner because of my personal desire to be an effective educational administrator.

Vision

My vision as a secondary principal has become more focused and clear. As I finish my third year as a secondary principal, I constantly find myself in search of information that will help me continue to build upon my foundations for leadership. Although I feel I have many qualities of a good
administrator, I believe it is essential in education to constantly be in search of new knowledge and stay abreast of new trends and methods.

I believe first, an effective administrator should have a personal perspective on what kind of leader they are and how they intend to lead. After reviewing the research, it becomes evident that becoming an effective leader is an evolutionary process. An administrator must be able to plan and evaluate, budget and bargain, recruit and hire, communicate and motivate, finance and govern, as well as educate those who are actively involved in the functions of education. I believe the past three years have begun the reflective process of what an effective leader is to me, and what qualities and skills I need to continue to develop to assist me in school administration. Leading through people, enhancing resiliency in children, and empowering teachers through collaboration are essential for success.

Leading Through People

As I did my research on effective leadership, it was not very long before I was overwhelmed by the literature and studies that I encountered. I immediately narrowed it down to topics that interested me which included: characteristics and traits of effective leaders, styles of leadership, and how leaders manage conflict. I first reflected on what makes a good leader. Leadership styles are frequently situation specific while leadership
characteristics are to inclusive. Critics of the “traits” approach to leadership theory pointed to the unwieldy nature of the list of characteristics to substantiate their claim that there are no leader traits that will hold for all leaders (Prealla & Smith, 1991). Eventually, traits theories were abandoned in favor of situational theories of leadership based on the belief that there are no inherent leadership traits, just leader styles or behaviors that may change radically from one situation to another. I always believed that I have inherent leadership qualities, but I am beginning to understand that I must not always lead but sometimes follow. Today, there is interest in the characteristics of effective leaders.

One of the characteristics of effective leaders is their ability and willingness to learn. Learning to be a leader is somewhat like learning to be a parent; your childhood and adolescence provide you with basic values and role models, but most of the learning takes place during the experience. It is a human process, full of trial and error, victories and defeats, timing and chance, intuition and insight (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

The part that interested me most about effective leadership characteristics is that of leaders being people oriented. I have based my vision on that concept and believe I am a people oriented person. I believe that effective principals have as their strongest asset an ability to work with
different kinds of people having various needs, interests, and expectations. Creating autonomy among students, staff, and parents to form a vision and create change is a key in restructuring (Mercado & Peeler, 1993). To be a people person, a principal must be sensitive, passionate, humorous, patient, and compassionate (Clover & Goens, 1991). I know I have some of those characteristics and now have a foundation to build on others.

As I looked through the information on leadership style, I came away with bits and pieces of many theories. Because leadership by definition includes action, any theory of leadership is helpful only if it can be used to guide action. Most researchers believe that there is no ideal approach that fits all situations; rather, the best view of leadership style is that it must vary to fit the particular situation at hand (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1987). I found out that I use an integrated style of leadership, one that combines task-oriented behavior with relationship-oriented behavior. This style will allow me to be flexible and promote risks within my building and school community.

The last section on effective leadership I researched dealt with managing conflict. I believed this area to be of importance because of the issues that continually face administrators. In my experiences I have found that too much time is dedicated to conflict and conflict resolution in education
and it is taking time away from the administrator being an educational leader.

Conflict is a natural part of human existence (Lindelow & Scott, 1989) and the public school administrator is the focal point of conflict by the very nature of the leader’s role. I have learned that conflict opens up issues, develops clarification of issues, increases involvement, improves problem solving, and is needed for growth in an educational institution or community. To achieve mastery of conflict management, the educational administrator must understand conflict, its types, sources, and dynamics, besides being familiar with numerous techniques for managing conflict. I have learned to become more passive and reflective in the management of conflict. I can now identify my conflict management philosophy as that of being an interactionist, recognizing the necessity of conflict, and realizing that conflict management is a major responsibility of an administrator.

I see myself as a change agent, that is getting staff, students and parents to move forward. As I reflect on leadership skills I realize that I must keep things in front of everyone and make sure that there are options to choose from. So often I see in education that an administrator adopts something all staff are to do, and it falls short of the goal because not everyone supports the concept. I believe that I must give different avenues for everyone to travel and let them make the choice, but be available to guide and direct. That way
everyone will get to where I want to be, but they will feel like they made the choice. I find that the staff I work with is more pro-active versus re-active because I make them feel like they are important and involved. The students and parents are also feeling good because they are being listened too and I try to use their ideas. So leadership in my opinion is really about teaching people to be pro-active. In doing so they learn to be positive and mediate conflict.

Enhancing Resiliency in Children

As I researched information on at-risk students I found that many studies showed an adolescent in a dysfunctional family has the capability to show resiliency to their circumstances. Hauser, Vieyra, Jacobsen, and Wertreib note that “Resiliency in children is the capacity of those who are exposed to identifiable risk factors to overcome those risks and avoid negative outcomes such as delinquency and behavioral problems, psychological maladjustment, academic difficulties, and physical complications” (as cited in Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 368). So what does all of that mean to me as an education leader? I found myself reflecting on the factors that might cause a child to be labeled as dysfunctional. I started to look at the various issues and concluded that the labels may involve the child having been abused physically, sexually, or emotionally. Other family factors may include alcoholism,
neglect, violence, or serious personal and psychiatric problems. A low socioeconomic status might also lead to problems in the home.

If you are born into poverty, you will likely be raised in poverty. If you are poor as an infant, you are poor as a child, and you are poor as a teenager. Also, if you are born into an atmosphere of violence, you are likely to be raised in an atmosphere of violence. (Katz, 1997, p. 32)

I have found that these issues are keys when working with students that have difficulty in school, because the student will live up to what is expected of him or her.

I believe that children who are exposed to multiple risk factors may follow the same pattern that was set by their parent/guardian. "Protective factors including the temperament of a child, unexpected sources of support in the family and community, and self-esteem lead a majority of at-risk children to succeed in life" (Rak & Patterson, 1996, p. 368). In a study that I read, by Mark Katz (1997), protective influences that are available to students will make a difference in their lives. I believe that a principal that has identified students that are at-risk, there needs to be some sort of intervention to create a protective influence for those students. Things that I believe that have a positive effect on students could be after-school recreation programs. I believe that those who form a close personal bond with a mentor, coach, or confidant may gain protection from these sources.
I believe a close personal bond with a person other than a family member can help to enhance social and interpersonal skills that will be needed as the individual attempts to change their life. I believe that when mentors are involved, mentors make coping a little easier. Tito, a gang member who participated in a program states, “Kids can walk around trouble if there is some place to walk to, and someone to walk with” (Katz, 1997, p. 32). It is also noted by McLaughlin et al. (as sited in Katz, 1997) that it can also be easy to miss the real needs of kids. I have found to have a trusted adult that is able to be there on a regular basis and be counted on may be crucial for a teenager who has no reliable adult in his/her life.

I believe that at least one special person is needed in a person’s life to overcome major hardships. This person offers support, companionship, and guidance. The most important factor this person demonstrates is that they genuinely care about the child at risk. Zimrin (1986) found that a special person could often be someone who offers support after school or during extra curricular activities i.e., a teacher or coach. This was especially the case with individuals who overcame abusive childhood experiences. Werner and Smith (as cited in Katz, 1997) found resilient children were ones that found a special person outside the family circle. This enabled the child to detach himself from situations where parents experienced chronic psychiatric problems. A special
person may also be a family member or someone in the extended family. Close-knit families may have a number of caring people a child can go to for support depending upon the situation.

I agree with Freedman (as cited in Katz, 1997), who studied mentoring programs around the United States concluding, not all mentoring situations are positive relationships. I believe that when a caring individual mentors a child who is vulnerable, it can positively affect the child’s self-image and what the child can accomplish as an adult. These relationships offer an important source of encouragement and need to be monitored to insure that relationships are successful and foster confidence. I have found that mentoring also forms a source of protection for children to share feelings and concerns.

The Search Institute, (Segal & Fairchild, 1996), a Minneapolis-based children’s research group, identified 30 resiliency-enhancing factors. The greater the number of these assets a person has, the greater the chance this child will avoid alcohol use, teen sex, problems in school, depression, or violent behavior. Many of the factors are those that seem to be common sense including: supportive parents, involvement in school activities, good peers, and other caring adults in their lives.

A student with an average or higher IQ, good temperament, and a personality that attracts people who will advocate for them, are good
predictors for success in all children but very important for those that may be at risk. Many people feel children who have experienced less than adequate home environments are doomed to have children who repeat the inadequate childhood experience. Statistics indicate that many, if not most of these children thrive or at least hold their own. Children of teen parents tend to avoid teen pregnancies themselves and even though most child abusers were abused themselves as children, most do not become child abusers (Shapiro, Friedman, Meyer & Loftus, 1996).

Habits such as how often a teen has dinner with their family, does this child have a curfew, and does the family attend church, are all good predictors of teen drug use, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (Rogan, 1998). I also believe that in the home of a dysfunctional family these would all be at a level that would likely have a higher risk for teen drug use unless the child has other outside positive influences in his/her life. The Big Brothers and Big Sisters nationwide youth-mentoring program cut drug use and school absenteeism by half as a result of fostering supportive adult attention for kids (Rogan, 1998).

Another article written by Rogan (1998) deals with the question of what makes an individual resilient? Resilience researcher, Psychiatrist Paul Steinhauser focused on “kids at risk” (p. 60) those who experience emotional
neglect, physical, and sexual abuse and how they grow into resilient adults. He explains that resilience involves three major components: personality, relationships with other people, and family experiences. He also believes a child who has a higher IQ and warm personality will have a better chance of being resilient in difficult situations. When people outside the family or someone in the extended family makes a connection with the child and gives the perception that, "Hey, I think you’re great," the child starts to believe it too. Children that have had a secure attachment early in life, although not necessarily to a parent, are more likely, in their adult life, to be capable of forming trusting relationships. Administrators must recognize the needs of their students and help identify the factors necessary to help the student build resilience. I believe the more competent the administrator is in recognizing students at-risk the better the chance of getting the student involved in school activities and building resilience.

As I continue to prepare myself in my administrative role I must be cautious of reform, change, and restructuring movements and innovations. In order to restructure to meet the demands of our new student population, I will have to explore the values and principles of the community. Again and again the research states that in order for a school to restructure it must come from the inside out (Clover & Goens, 1992). Transforming schools to be agents
working with resiliency of adolescents can only occur when school staff begin changing their context dramatically, restructuring their organization, and reassessing their values and principles. Taking what is already being done in your school and making it better (Goodlad, 1992), seems to be the stance taken by many educational experts. Alternatives have to be made available and the process of change must be dealt with in a professional manner. The principal must be able to effectively take bold initiatives and be totally responsible for the program and its accountability. The principal must be surrounded by outstanding staff who have the ability to work with at-risk children. The principal must secure funding to entice those involved to be active participants in the program (Kammoun, 1991).

As a principal I find myself continually touching base with at-risk students to understand if we are meeting their needs. I have provided staff with the teaching style-learning style inventory so that they are able to more clearly understand how to work with students who may be at-risk. I will strive to encourage staff to understand that a student will struggle in the classroom if needs are not met and it is up to the individual teacher to recognize the needs of the student. As an educational leader it will be my responsibility to provide the information and literature for the staff to read and
absorb to improve their skills. I need to make sure that I have a full scale of resources that will fit all the different personalities and teaching styles that I will be asked to lead.

Empowering Teachers Through Collaboration

I believe to be successful the principal needs to be collaborative in the leadership position. Duff (1994) suggests the use of site-based management to empower teachers. Having followed and used Duff’s suggestions I have found that teachers are very willing to accept the responsibility of being apart of the decision making process. I deem it necessary for teachers and administrators to work as a team to better the educational process. This use of empowerment by the principal produces such benefits as increased teacher satisfaction, professionalism, and higher self-esteem, while increasing staff morale and efficiency (Peel & Walker, 1994).

As an administrator I have grown to know the importance of accepting the opinions and decisions of others. After all, they are educated to make good decisions which are based on the children’s welfare. In order to have functional and high performing educational institutions we must allow teachers to have input in the educational system. I truly believe a successful school begins when the principal takes an active role in the education of students. Like asking the staff to be involved in the decision making process
the principal must get out of the office and into the classroom. I know from personal experience that this is not easy, but it is possible and has to be made a priority. The teachers feel more responsible for what is taking place in the classroom, and the principal is kept up-to-date on what is occurring in classrooms and around the building. Based on my experiences as a principal, I have discovered that the teachers and students are more comfortable asking for assistance when I am in the classroom or hallways. Because of my willingness to be visible I am able to quickly evaluate various situations and offer assistance or suggestions. Because I am visible the staff is more willing to accept suggestions and try new ideas. I feel that modeling expectations helps them take a chance on what I think will be useful to them in their classroom.

I have found myself using the collaborative, facilitative strategy of leadership. In my first administrative position at Spalding Catholic I thought I used collaboration, but now that I reflect I only used it when it was convenient. At Irwin-Kirkman-Manilla I use collaborative decision making as the norm because I recognize the need to establish ownership to make the changes that need to be made. True collaboration is involving those that hold an interest in making change. By getting more people involved I get a greater depth of understanding of the interest of those wanting to make change than I would have just myself making the decisions.
Conclusion

The knowledge acquired the last three years has helped develop my personal philosophy giving me new direction and confidence. I am excited because I have continued to learn and I have discovered how to share my excitement with those that I lead. Learning is indeed a life-long endeavor and it must always be kept in the forefront of our thinking. I better understand why I want to be a principal. The new ideas that I continue to encounter will help me create new visions for the educational community in which I live. Finally, I have changed. I have come to recognize many of my weaknesses and realize there are many areas in which I have to improve if I am to become an effective leader. In my heart I have found direction for my passion. This passion has both feelings and focus. Passion will always keep the students as the most important ingredient in the recipe we call education. The passion I have will allow flexibility and change to be a common experience in life and the school community. I believe that my passion for the students will guide the changes I attempt to make and be the integral part of my administrative vision.

I believe that through the implementation of special programs, administrators have the chance to deal with challenging students. It is essential that administrators lead the curriculum development process in the
selection, implementation, and evaluation of programs. It is important to select carefully those programs which are appropriate for the school, and also to make teachers feel comfortable with programs through adequate and efficient inservices. Teachers and principals need to work cooperatively to evaluate programs and make suggestions for the betterment of the students. The principal needs to involve the faculty, parents, community, and businesses to help develop a long-lasting relationship between the school and the outside world.

Above all, it is the absolutely necessary for administrators to cultivate trust, confidence, integrity, and moral responsibility within the school. If I can create opportunities for educators to feel good about themselves, they will pass this feeling on to students and then into the community. By embracing these components of effective leadership, effective schools will result.
References List


