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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The area of school administration has never been one for easy success. It has always been left wide open for criticism and debate from many different groups of people and community organizations. Since the beginning of this great nation, leaders have debated on the best methods and techniques of educating the children. School leaders have changed with the times just like other leaders in our society. Adjustment and change will always be an important aspect of the success of education.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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And Postsecondary Education

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James Muench

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Introduction

The area of school administration has never been one for easy success. It has always been left wide open for criticism and debate from many different groups of people and community organizations. Since the beginning of this great nation, leaders have debated on the best methods and techniques of educating the children. School leaders have changed with the times just like other leaders in our society. Adjustment and change will always be an important aspect of the success of education.

As I come closer to the end of my formal training in the Educational Leadership program the first thing that comes to mind is the value of reflection. Reflecting about what I have learned and accomplished throughout the program leaves me wondering where to start. I remember doing my first research paper, planning a budget, writing an attendance policy and reading case studies. Journaling for class to reflect on discussion topics and speakers was new but certainly educational. Discovering leadership styles and characteristics not only was helpful but, it taught me that every leader has their own way to lead and that there is no absolute way to lead. Understanding leadership styles and how they can work together is a very important concept of this program and one that helped me to gain confidence in my ability to lead. This has helped me to know who I am and what kind of people I need around me to make a successful team. The role of the principal is very complex and demanding, therefore the principal needs

to be one that has confidence in their own abilities and a willingness to continue learning.

Experience

My teaching experience includes fifteen years in the classroom. During my first three years, I taught junior high health. Later I entered the field of special education and taught mild disabilities. This career move has allowed me to explore many leadership opportunities. I have acted as the coordinator for a corrections program that enabled youthful offenders to finish their high school education. This gave me a taste of some administrative leadership with responsibilities like budgeting, hiring, record keeping, and supervising employees.

After the position with the Department of Corrections, I entered into the challenge of being the Summer School Coordinator of Special Education for the Cedar Rapids Community School District. This experience allowed me to practice my leadership skills as well by hiring and supervising staff, handling parent phone calls, making attendance decisions and preparing statistical data for an end of the summer report.

Since I have entered the Educational Leadership Program, I have assumed a quasi-administrative role at my high school as the Ninth Grade Facilitator in the counseling office. This role has given me many opportunities to present my school to other schools within the district and promote what we stand for. My job as facilitator has allowed me to lead staff in many ways, act as a leader to

incoming ninth grade students and be involved in some of the decisions important to my school. Many parents of incoming ninth graders value my advice for the good of their son or daughter. Opportunities like these are examples of the things that I do to promote my school to the best of my ability. These leadership opportunities have been important to me in my development as an educational leader.

Values

Dr. Else commented several times that our values would become our vision. That what we value most would make up the vision that you develop for your building. In stating my values, I would start by claiming respect as my highest priority. Respect for all as individuals including respect for each other as it pertains to individual differences. Practicing tolerance is very important to me.

Along with respect, I highly value a strong academic preparation for all students at all levels. This means that the whole staff is responsible for preparing each student to their fullest potential. Students with diverse interests would have the opportunity to pursue what they value based on their needs and preferences.

The school community needs to be one that is positively involved with the members of that community. The school building should be a place used for community functions, meetings and a positive landmark that the community can be proud to claim as their own.

Vision

My personal professional vision for administrative practice would have to begin with the purpose of schools and the educational system. The United States Constitution did not address the issue of education; therefore, this is an issue that each state has assumed and has the power to decide the guidelines and practices for training each child. It is the constitutional obligation of each state to educate its citizens so that they might become a productive member of society (K. Alexander and M. D. Alexander, 1998). With this responsibility comes the notion of compensatory education for all children until the age of sixteen. If students attend school until they are sixteen, does this guarantee a successful education for all? No, there are no guarantees of success in our current system of education and there might not ever be any. Should administrators be held accountable for guaranteed success of the students of their schools? Will there be a day when a lawsuit is brought against a school district and superintendent over the unsuccessful attempt at educating a student? If such a lawsuit happens and the courts decide against the school district, it will have a profound effect on administrative practices of the future.

Principalship

It has been documented that the roles and responsibilities of principals have changed over the past five years. Portin, Shen and Williams (1998) conducted a study in the state of Washington and found: principals were expected to

collaborate more with others when making decisions, were required to comply with increasingly complex school reform and truancy laws, assumed additional and sometimes unfamiliar roles, were asked to respond to changing and sometimes conflicting demands, and were required to work even more hours than before. These changes have added to the notion that principals are becoming increasingly like managers, rather than instructional leaders. Kowalski (1993) states that the requirement of a principal to be more of a manager has become a barrier to change. On the other hand, he says that it can also instigate change, especially in the area of preparing future school leaders.

The position of the principal, as presented by Marsha Speck (1999) in her model, is that the principal must maintain four multidimensional, yet integrated roles: educator, leader, manager and inner person. The Principalship Model was designed for principals as a guide for understanding and building a learning community not only for students, but also for teachers, associates, support staff, parents and community members as well. Understanding The Principalship Model helps to make sense out of the many roles that the principal must master when building a learning community. According to Sergiovanni (1995):

In the actual world of schooling, the task of the principal is to make sense of messy situations by increasing understanding and discovering and communicating meanings. Uncertainty and complexity are normal aspects in the process of schooling. (pp. 31-32)

The educator role seems to be the role that most people picture when thinking about the principalship. In this role the principal stays current on research in education; understands student characteristics and needs; develops, implements and evaluates curriculum and instruction; improves school climate; and improves student services. This role is considered the instructional leadership role of the principal.

The role of leader for the principal involves analyzing the current situation, anticipating what is best for the future and together with other school and community members developing a school vision. Within this role, the principal needs to be able to assess the capacity for change, both individual and group, and then implement the appropriate method at the appropriate time. Critical elements of the leader role include: empowering staff and students, building trust, monitoring and assessing progress and providing assistance. The principal must be genuine in showing appreciation and care for staff, students and the whole school community.

The manager role is relatively new to the principalship, but many will say is the most important. Within this role, the principal must prepare, plan, organize, direct and carry out all school operations. This means taking care of the daily tasks of keeping the school running and providing the necessary environment for teachers and students to instruct and learn. This role also would include the

delegation of duties to assistant principals, counselors, teachers, support staff, custodians, food service personnel and all others that come into the building.

The inner person role is one that seems to have become a role just as important as the others have. This role has to do with the personal beliefs and internal balance that a principal needs to maintain while executing the job of principal day in and day out. Important in this role is that a principal clarifies where they stand on social issues that might affect the school and learning community, as well as their personal educational philosophy. This role indicates the foundation for what the principal believes in and does. The principal must learn to balance family and friends, financial security, humor and community involvement with the job itself. Ethics, values and morals are critical elements of this role.

Leadership

My definition of leadership is that leadership is an influence relationship between the leader and followers toward a common goal or vision. This establishes a working relationship to promote a positive climate where all persons involved in the learning community can work together toward that vision.

The requisites of a leader then would be to clearly define personal and systematic direction. This would include a set of values, of which when carried out to the fullest would make up a vision to work toward establishing. The leader also has to have some sense of accountability to improve the system for which they have become involved in. This would include staff development

opportunities and other professional development situations. The leader needs to be able to use the personnel that they have in the best way possible. It is very important in a leadership position to be able to identify the qualities that people have around you and then utilize those skills. The leader must have a very good understanding of teaching and learning. In education, teaching and learning is what the learning community sees as the ultimate goal. The leader of a building must understand sound educational practices and be able to learn more every day. One of the most important requisites that a leader must possess is that of being able to share the vision and establish the culture of what is important in that school. What is important in the school will become obvious simply because of the climate and surroundings that are present. This could be visual in nature, but also things that go on behind the scenes.

The climate of a school has become such an important issue among students and staff. The administrator who takes the scientific, or “old school” approach, would exhibit characteristics that would be similar to that of an autocratic style. Leadership in this situation would be “top down”. There is no discussion when it comes to making decisions. The building principal would consider solutions to a problem and come up with the best option. The leader makes the decision and the staff views this as a directive. Feelings or opinions of the staff would not enter in to the decision. Staff with expertise in a certain area would not be consulted

either. The building principal or leader in this type of leadership style would act as the expert at all times.

The administrator using a leadership style of the human relations (Daft, 2002) type would involve subordinates in decision-making. This person would seek out advice from staff members or others that the person trusts when it would come to making decisions. This person may even ask for the opinions of all staff, first to identify a problem, and ultimately then to come up with a solution. This kind of active participation from the staff would be very typical under this type of leadership. This leadership would also tend to generate more staff follow through.

The characteristics of the scientific management style that would work well with me would be confidence, quick decision-making ability and the ability to act on their own to lead and take on a project when needed. The characteristics of the human systems approach that would work well with me would be the ability to actively involve the staff in problem solving, being a good listener and researching possible solutions to concerns to improve the learning environment. This would greatly empower the staff to be a loyal participant toward the vision.

Staff participation in the school vision comes based on individual characteristics of each leader. Administrative practices will change in the future just as they have always needed to adjust to the changes that have taken place in society. The pressures that society has put on the educational system have at

times been very demanding and at times very necessary. Educational leadership has evolved into a skill that encompasses many different characteristics. A person who leads has to be a person who is willing to make decisions for the good of the organization and is able to show confidence in the decision made. The educational leader of today has become a political influence within the community that they represent.

Through the Life Styles Inventory (1989), I have come to realize what kind of leader I am. I have become very comfortable with the idea that I can be an effective leader by understanding the assets that I can bring to a leadership team. My Steadiness profile confirms that I am consistent, patient, desiring to help others, loyal, calming and a good listener. This fits me well. Along with this, I have learned what type of people I need to surround myself with to create a more balanced working atmosphere. My profile needs someone who can react quickly when the situation presents itself. I would need a person who is self-promoting, somewhat spontaneous, and can constantly stretch toward the challenges of a task. I found through this inventory that I have some characteristics of the Conscientiousness profile also. From this I learned that I can be flexible with my roles and can step out of one role and into another if needed within the makeup of the leadership team.

Characteristics of the high dominant type would be like that of the leader from the scientific approach. High task orientation, quick decision maker, willingness

to take on difficult tasks, confident in decisions made and able to get the job done when needed are some very good descriptors of the high dominant type personality profile. Characteristics of the high steadiness type would be like those of the human systems approach to leadership. Maintain the status quo, consider all options, maintaining positive relations with staff, taking calculated risks, thoughtful decision maker and a good listener are some ways I would describe a leader of the steadiness personality profile.

This information would help me to realize what I should do as I take on leadership tasks within my current building. I would utilize the traits of the dominant personality for discipline situations or discipline policies. Many times discipline is a job that does not help to make friends. This personality type would be good with dealing with situations that arise and need quick answers. This person would be a good one to consult when contemplating issues. They will be able to offer confident information, with a quick decision, as well as be able to support their decision. The person would be a great asset to me and would compliment my personality style because of these qualities.

The steadiness personality principal might be a difficult person to deal with for me because that is my profile. Between the two of us, it might take a very long time to come to some sort of a decision. We might support each other in looking for solutions that are more possible and investigating things for periods longer than might be necessary. We both may be too involved in getting teacher input

and being concerned with making too many changes. What I would try to do is to figure out which one of us would be more comfortable in stepping out of our profiles to take more of the influence type of approach. I believe that I am going to need someone who can help keep things somewhat entertaining and fun at times. I will need someone who can add a little "fish sticks" to the atmosphere. I enjoy fun on the job; I just am not too good at it. Selling my ideas is sometimes a little difficult for me if I am not totally convinced of the plan myself. This is how I would approach working with the steadiness profile principal. This person would be a great one for researching new educational ideas and techniques. This person would also help me to be a better instructional leader.

From the C. A. R. E. Profile Assessment (1995), my Creator/ Refiner role identifies me as being good at developing theories and analyzing things leading to solutions and various possibilities. This role further identifies me as being good at recognizing and exploring alternatives, as well as preferring to be actively involved in the task that is to be accomplished. This describes me very well.

In support of these findings, the Dimensions of Leadership Profile (1994) has identified me as being a leader with a focus on accomplishment. This seems to fit me very well. I take a lot of pride in knowing that I can be trusted to do whatever it takes to get a job done when assigned to a task. The profile identifies this type of leader as an effective one for getting people to work together, persuading, negotiating or refusing to compromise when this is needed. What I learned from

this is that when I lead with this style, I need to be careful of being arrogant and overly confident of my importance. With this, I have learned that I need to be conscious of building the team to work together. Every school is lead by several individuals and how those individuals work together will determine how successful the organization will be.

Laurie Beth Jones (1995) has spent many years in the business world involved with many organizations. These experiences have exposed her to many different styles of leadership. What she learned from these experiences was that, of all the different leadership styles she experienced, the leadership style of Jesus was the best. Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership, is a book that Ms. Jones wrote identifying important leadership qualities that Jesus exhibited during his days on earth.

Jesus was a leader who was passionate about a cause, saving the world. He had to be fully committed to this cause in order to draw the following that he had. An educational leader has to be passionate to the cause of education or some specific part of it. As a building principal, you must know your passion. Jesus was willing to walk the road alone if he needed to do it. He told his followers that they were either with him or against him. Jesus was passionately committed to his cause.

Jones also points out that a leader must be willing to take risks or look foolish with their public image. Many great leaders in the business world and inventors

failed with their first attempts at reaching their dream, eventually making things work in the end. As an educational leader, you must be willing to go out on a limb, taking risks and doing whatever it takes to make your dream a reality. You need to know yourself and what you value educationally. A leader needs to stand up for what they believe is right, even if it means “thinking out of the box”. Jesus was willing to look foolish.

Another quality of a leader according to Jones is that a leader must avoid “energy leaks”. Jesus viewed judging others as an energy leak to the highest level. The building principal must avoid being caught up in the things that are irrelevant to the cause. They must avoid the petty things. Knowing what you value and picking your battles will save a lot of energy. Judging others in my opinion refers to rumors or untruths that will happen in your building when you are the principal. Of course, you will have to evaluate your staff, but I do not see this as being judgmental. I view this as an evaluation based on factual observation or strong evidence gathered over time. Jesus did not waste his time judging others.

A leader must also be willing to do the difficult things. The principal will encounter many difficult tasks, of which, many of these must be faced head on. I believe that an effective leader must not avoid these difficult tasks because they will not go away. The leader must take a stand based on what is right or make the difficult phone call. The leader must face the difficult teacher to discuss their

ineffectiveness or talk to the media in the time of a crisis. Jesus did things like this, he did the difficult things.

Hersey and Blanchard's situational theory (1982) suggests that the characteristics of followers in situations are important to the type of leadership that is necessary. The readiness level of the followers, for whatever reason, should determine the style of leadership to promote change. When the followers are unable or insecure about change the leader should use a directive style. One where the leader provides specific instructions with closely supervised performance. This would be the Telling stage. In the Selling stage, the followers are willing or confident about change, but are low in ability to change. The appropriate leadership style here would be to explain decisions and provide followers the opportunity to give input for decision-making. The followers in the Participating stage are able but unwilling or insecure about change. The leader in this situation should be one that supports the followers with advice and information. The Delegating stage allows the leader to give followers a tremendous amount of freedom to make decisions for the good of the group. This works when the followers are very capable and highly willing to change and have a clear understanding of the vision of the leader.

Developing leadership within the school is very important. According to Sergiovanni (1999), the greatest challenge and primary responsibility of the principal is to develop a caring community in the school. He states that the best

way to build a community in the school is to let the students know that they are needed. Many stories have been told of how communities have pulled together in a time of crisis. Many people working toward a common goal have accomplished great things. A common goal is what schools need to bring students to a sense of community.

After the April 20, 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School, there seemed to be somewhat of a sense of crisis in the air at my high school. The students definitely were affected by it. There seemed to be some sort of a common goal that students wanted to pull together to make sure that the same tragedy did not happen again. On the other hand, maybe it was in respect to the students of Columbine High School. Whatever it was, the atmosphere was different among the students. There were many pleas by the principal for help to thwart any similar types of action. Then came the summer break and how quickly things change. The common goal faded. The sense of community among the students changed. Should the principal be responsible for this? Is this a role that the principal has always been expected to fulfill? Many people believe it is.

The legislated role of the principal, according to the Saskatchewan Principalship Study (Renihan and Whiteside, 1999), is to be responsible for the general organization, administration and supervision of the school, the staff and administrative functions having to do with the school and the school board. This seems to be a tremendously vague job description on the one hand, but on the

other hand, it seems to be somewhat to the point. To me this means that the principal should be responsible for having a plan or vision of what is to take place in the school and then organize what happens in that school, make decisions along the way to keep it on track according to the stated mission and also supervise those responsible for carrying out the objectives.

The perceived role of the principal, according to the Saskatchewan Principalship Study (Renihan and Whiteside, 1999), is that he or she is responsible for the administration of many things. The principal should supervise office personnel, monitor classroom teaching practices, supervise instruction in the classroom, organize student vocational counseling, maintain a positive moral among students and teachers, organize extra-curricular activities, be involved in community leadership as well as exhibit leadership involvement in professional organizations. Is that all? Is there anything else that could possibly fall into the responsibility of the principal? This overwhelmingly supports the previously stated concern over the amount of time principals spend on the job.

Many people have strong opinions about the concept of intelligence. Typically, our society view students who earn high grades in school and those who receive high scores on standardized tests to be very intelligent. I would agree that these measures indicate ability for academic intelligence, but these measures are not the ultimate for predicting successful intelligence. Successful intelligence can be defined as the acquisition and use of whatever you need to

know to be successful in a certain environment. Research has shown that academic intelligence is not the only predictor for a successful career. According to Sternberg (1996), people who are high in successful intelligence recognize their strengths and weaknesses and work well within themselves. They are goal setters. They are highly motivated, but also know when to stop or just persevere. These people tend to be people who follow through on things. They are confident people; they can figure out ownership of problems and best of all, they put thought into action. This type of person will do whatever it takes to get the job done. I agree strongly with this concept.

My teaching experiences in a variety of special education programs ranging from mild learning disabilities to severe conduct disorders has allowed me to witness what I think is successful intelligence. In these years I have had the privilege to witness a number of students who seemed as though they would not amount to much or that might not even graduate, but through hard work and determination and overcoming the deficiencies they were born with, made it. Could these students be considered examples of this successful intelligence? I think so. Working with all kinds of special needs students has given me an appreciation for the student who works hard, doesn't do many super things, but in the end, gets the job done. Sometimes they even surprise themselves at what they have done.

Conclusion

Professionally speaking, I believe that I possess a certain amount of this successful intelligence. I like to think of it as good old-fashioned common sense. I have not been one to come up with innovative ideas and trend setting plans, but I have survived on making good decisions at the appropriate times. I can be patient if I think that it is necessary. I can be persistent at the appropriate times also. I am confident that I have the ability to understand students enough to challenge a student when they are willing to be challenged and nurture a student when they need nurturing. I have learned a lot from some very experienced people that I have worked with over the years. I have also learned to be my own decision maker at times and to ignore certain people and issues at other times. I like the phrase of picking your own battles. I try to do this as much as possible.

Personally, I like to lead by example in everything that I do. Whether it is in my teaching, my coaching, or just my everyday life, I am usually a very practical person, but on occasion, I can act somewhat whimsical. I am not afraid to volunteer my time for the activities that my children are participating in, as well as being actively involved in my church. Every day I try very hard to be the best Christian that I possibly can be. However, like all of us, I have a few pet peeves also. Lack of courtesy is probably my biggest one. It also irritates me when I witness people who seemingly act as though it is beneath them to do tedious or menial tasks.

Knowing more about the different personality styles of various leaders has helped me understand how I might fit in with others in a leadership role. Knowing myself and how to identify skills and qualities will be very important when forming leadership teams for a school building. When the time comes that I might be in a position to be a school leader, I believe that I will be able to make sound decisions, motivate staff, manage effectively, resolve conflict and instill change. These are some of the most important qualities that school leaders need to be successful. I firmly believe that I belong in the education field and I strive to someday be able to lead by example.

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