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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for leading elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

My beliefs about education have been evolving for nearly four decades. These beliefs about education have developed as I have grown professionally. My many roles as a student, teacher, mother, and counselor have influenced my beliefs and values. Each role has provided a different perspective from which I have viewed the educational world. The different roles, and their perspectives, have overlapped, agreed, and disagreed. My life roles and experiences have shaped me and will continue to do so.

The list for elements that are critical to exemplary leadership is truly endless. I believe that for an administrator the elements change day-by-day and minute-by-minute. The elements of solution-focused problem solving, communication with staff, students, parents, and the public, and research based data that leads us and allows us to teach more effectively are critical to being an exemplary administrator. These critical elements will create a positive school culture, a staff that believes that every child can be a successful learner, and a school where every student fulfills his/her highest potential.

PREFERRED VISION FOR LEADING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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by

Tammy Murphy-Flynn

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My beliefs about education have been evolving for nearly four decades. These beliefs about education have developed as I have grown professionally. My many roles as a student, teacher, mother, and counselor have influenced my beliefs and values. Each role has provided a different perspective from which I have viewed the educational world. The different roles, and their perspectives, have overlapped, agreed, and disagreed. My life roles and experiences have shaped me and will continue to do so.

My life as a student has been varied. I have had positive and negative educational experiences. I remember one experience in fourth grade that was the deciding factor in choosing an occupation. I had moved and had attended a new parochial school. The school I attended in third grade had introduced multiplication and division with little time spent on it. The new school was further along in their multiple and division skills. I remember feeling embarrassed and stupid over my lack of math knowledge. The teacher called on me often, knowing I didn't have the answers. For the first time in my young life, I had to stay after school to get my work done. My teacher did very little to help and seemed to enjoy my misery. I hated school. I cried every morning. Finally, my mother enrolled me in the public school. What a difference! In a matter of weeks, I had learned my multiplication and division facts. I learned an important lesson that pressuring and embarrassing a student doesn't help them learn. Kindness and patience coupled with stimulating teaching changed my outlook on school and myself. This experience taught me that students who have a caring, empathetic, skilled teacher can learn. I believe the same is true for administrators in dealing with staff, parents, and students.

I believe education has to deal with all aspects of the student. Students are people too. Teachers, counselors, and principals must consider and understand a student's academics, emotions, behaviors, social and family life to help them succeed. I have seen many teachers and administrators, in my various roles that have been good disseminators of facts but have lacked basic people skills. I have often wondered why they chose education as an occupation. Education is all about people, knowing how to deal with them and how to bring the best out in them. On the other hand, I have seen teachers and administrators who have been great with people but have lacked organizational skills or self-discipline. These educators were well loved by their students and staff but not well respected. I believe that teachers and administrators must demonstrate a balanced approach in leadership to bring out the best in their students and staff.

I began to think about becoming an administrator when I became a counselor. After five years of graduate school, I was very excited to be done and start my new job of helping students. I had never thought of becoming an administrator prior to that time. My experience as a counselor altered my original view of my occupational goal. As a counselor I found myself working very closely with the building administrator/s and being treated as more of an equal partner in helping with difficult parents, students, teachers, and problems. Many times I found myself mediating with groups that were having conflicts of some sort. I became frustrated with my limitations. If I had parents and students that had legitimate complaints with a teacher, I found myself in a limbo of sorts. I was a teacher's equal, yet felt awkward dealing with what should have been an

administrative duty. I decided I had the skills to be a good administrator. I thought that my K-12 experiences and many roles would be an asset.

A friend and colleague, an associate principal at the high school where I had worked, influenced my decision to become an administrator. Sally and I often worked together in dealing with difficult students and their issues. She had a wonderful sense of humor: she always listened to her students and staff: and she did what she felt was fair. A day after she had told me she would write me a reference for graduate school she died. She was what every administrator should be.

I believe leadership is like being the captain of a ship. There are many possible outcomes. The outcomes will be influenced by outside influences like wind, rain, storms, people, and a thousand unforeseen complications. The final outcome will be the measuring stick of how good a leader the captain was. I believe leaders lead by example. They show others how to do it. They don't expect others to do something that they wouldn't do themselves. They commend people on jobs well done and help people who are lacking in the necessary skills to acquire them. Leaders assume responsibility for results and let others know what needs to be done when it is not being done. Leaders listen to others to find out how things can be better. Leaders, much like a captain of a ship, stay until the job is done. They are there to support, inform, educate in anyway that helps the cause or goal.

I value all people, but I have always been a fighter for the underdog and the underprivileged. Students have been my cause. They look to their parents, teachers, and

administrators for guidance and help. I believe my duty is to help give students a safe, encouraging, academically challenging learning environment. It takes cooperation, flexibility, and hard work to create that school culture, but it is worth the effort to see a student succeed. I believe if you want to help the world, start with a child!

I believe there are many critical elements for exemplary educational leadership. Four critical elements that I believe every administrator should possess solution focused thinking, good communication skills, an understanding of brain based learning, and data-driven leadership skills. If these critical elements are a part of the administrator's working and problem solving skills, exemplary educational leadership will take place.

Solution Focused Problem Solving

The first critical element for exemplary educational leadership is solution focused problem solving. Solution Focus is a way of thinking and speaking that encourages people to be positive, to look at what is working, and to have hope. Solution Focus began as a counseling technique in Solution Focus Brief Therapy (SFBT). Therapists and counselors found that sessions took less time and were more productive when the counselor focused on solutions, rather than problems. SFBT asked what was working and when was it happening. An unofficial slogan for SFBT, which fits nicely into the education field, is: If it works, don't fix it. If it doesn't work, do something different.

Solution Focus teaching and leading are essential to the success of all students, as well as the development and implementation of a school's vision. As Wilmore (2002) states, we are not here to promote only the education of those who are easy to teach. In other words, we are here to teach all children. In order to achieve that vision, we must think positively. Looking at what a student can do allows us to look at possibilities rather than disabilities.

As an administrator, I would be a model, a mentor, and a teacher of Solution Focused education. I would provide my staff with professional development on how to use solution focus with students who are a challenge academically or behaviorally. Role-playing is an excellent way to demonstrate the solution focused thinking and language. Using two different approaches for two minutes will enable teachers to see the difference between traditional problem solving and focusing on solutions that work (Metcalf, 1999). When role-playing, the first teacher's role is to use traditional problem solving language. He/She is to convince the other student that he has a problem. The second teacher, playing the student in the role-play, is told to be as difficult as possible and talk negatively about school. The role-play illustrates the ineffectiveness of traditional problem solving. In the second role-play the teacher asks questions from a Solution Focused list. The questions relay empathy, hope for things to change, exception hunting, scaling of the problem, and brainstorming for small increments on the solution scale. This role-play helps the teacher to better understand Solution Focus in the classroom and how it can help them as well as the student. Metcalf (1999) would implement a

Solution Team that would be made up of teachers. This team would meet regularly and be rewarded with comp time. Teachers would nominate a leader for the team to help keep them on track. It would be essential for the administrator to meet with the leader and instructors to suggest Solution Focus readings, to be involved with the team, and to continue to visit the team to check their progress. This involvement conveys support, interest, and commitment to the team and the vision of becoming a Solution Focused school.

Modeling Solution Focus is done through interaction with students, parents, and teachers. The most powerful instruction I, an administrator, can give is to show others how Solution Focus really works. One way to model and help teachers to use Solution Focus is to implement it into the teacher's referral. One author (Metcalf, 1995) suggests using a process where the administrator after receiving a student referral sympathizes with the concerns of the teacher and credits him/her for knowing when to refer the student. The administrator then asks the teacher to complete a Teacher Referral Form over a period of a few days and return it by a specific date. This referral form forces the teacher to list times when he/she has noticed the student doing well in class. It is used as a tool to brainstorm for solutions when the administrator conferences with the student. With this process, new behavior takes place due to the positive reinforcement and validation of the student's successful behaviors. The teacher notices positive behavior and may begin to see the student differently. As a result of the teacher's new view and reaction to the student, the student may start to improve. This begins a positive chain

reaction known as the domino effect (Davis, 1999). The domino effect is when something that appears to be minor progress leads to the student feeling accomplishment that begins a new attitude with new behaviors.

A Solution Focused administrator is a visionary and instructional leader. He/She has a vision for a school where all students, staff, and parents look at what others can do and think about how to build on those strengths. This vision would end complaining and negativity. This vision would be the beginning of instilling hope in students, parents, and teachers. Professional development is foundational for the success of Solution Focus teaching. Most people do not enjoy change and need to buy into new plans. Without the direction and instruction from the educational leader of the building, real change will not take place. A school will become Solution Focused with an administrator that leads with vision, instruction, and ensures that strategic plans are followed through.

Communication

The second critical element for exemplary educational leadership is communication. Communication is essential in leading and responding to students, staff, parents, and the community. An administrator must be able to respond and listen actively if he/she would like to have the rapport and trust necessary to inspire a school community. Good communication improves relationships. Relationships can motivate and impassion people. Education is about people and relationships that build learning.

Parents are one of the most important groups with whom an administrator communicates. According to Kitty Porterfield (2003), administrators must first find out

what expectations parents have and manage them by listening and understanding their needs. The administrator should communicate what the staff plans to implement.

Listening to information is as important as sharing information. However, dialogue can often end in conflicting views. It is important to listen and empathize with the parents.

Porterfield stresses the importance of understanding why parents are angry. She lists four reasons:

- They or their child have gotten injured.
- They are afraid their child might be injured.
- They believe that their values or beliefs are being threatened.
- They believe that they and/or their children are not being listened to and/or helped (Porterfield, 2003).

Chapko and Buchko (2002) believe effective communication practices will reduce anxiety and confrontation with difficult parents. Using active listening and open body language while maintaining positive, professional behaviors will help to defuse and calm a parent down. How an administrator communicates is critical to his/her rapport and reputation with parents. Other ways to avoid misunderstandings and keep parents informed are to have an open door policy, an accessible phone line, and communicate frequently with parents. Building a bridge of communication will not only help the administrator, it will also build a relationship of trust and respect that will enable the parents and the administrator to work collaboratively for the student.

An administrator must have healthy communication skills with his/her staff. If the most important factor in real estate is location, location, location, then the most important element of school unity and culture is relationship, relationship, and relationship. The relationship between the administrator and his/her staff will determine the culture and vision of the school. This relationship is a reflection of how well the administrator communicates with his/her staff. Through a survey of 95 Tennessee superintendents and supervisors, Donna Matthews (2002) found that working with staff cooperatively was ranked first out of 23 competencies. A few of the other implications she found for principals were:

- Principals should develop positive personal relations with faculty, staff, students, and parents.
- Principals should collaborate with a network of colleagues.
- Principals should get feedback regularly from parents, teachers, and supervisors.

Effective communication is a dialogue that promotes honesty, acceptance, trust, and collaboration through active listening. This communication builds a better rapport/relationship with the staff that directly affects the teaching and learning that takes place in the building.

An administrator should have honest and positive communication with the community. The community has the least amount of direct contact with the school and the administrator. Yet the community often makes the important decisions regarding the school's future and what it is able to offer to whom. Communication can build trust and

enlighten the community to the positive activities that are taking place in the school building. Daniel Domenech (2002) believes every principal needs to establish good relationships with reporters to help build a mutual respect. This mutual respect will make a reporter more likely to listen to and report the administrator's side of the story when there's a controversial incident at the school. Working with the media is an important part of communicating with the community.

Communication is a critical element for exemplary educational leadership. An educational leader must have the communication skills to relate to everyone and create a welcoming atmosphere. This critical element aligns with all the Iowa Standards for School Leaders (ISSL). In order to facilitate, articulate, implement, advocate, nurture, instruct, manage, collaborate, respond, influence, or act with integrity, an administrator must have communication skills. A leader without communication skills cannot lead. Knowledge alone is not enough. A leader must ensure that the needs of students, parents, and staff members are met. If perception is more important than reality then communication is the key that helps the administrator bring the two together.

Brain Based Learning

The third critical element for exemplary educational leadership is to clearly understand brain based learning. Administrators are forever looking for the answers to what motivates, engages, and educates every child. The world is constantly changing, yet educational strategies have changed very little in the past century. The same active teacher and passive student roles are enacted in American classrooms on a daily basis.

For a small minority of students, whose intelligence is stronger in linguistic or mathematical areas, the current method of teaching to and memorizing the curriculum is successful (Parnell, 1996). The reality is that a much larger diverse population is not motivated, engaged, or successful in school. If administrators want to develop learners they must use the research from brain based learning to help students and teachers create connections and meaning. Brandt & Wolfe (1998) state that there has been more information learned about the brain in the past ten years than the previous one hundred years. Brain based teaching, learning, and leading are critical elements for exemplary educational leadership.

Administrators of today would be negligent if they were to continue ignoring the data and research that has proven successful for teachers and students. Kovalik (1994) gives eight classroom applications necessary for establishing a brain-compatible classroom. These applications enable students to function from their cerebral cortex. The first application for successful learning is absence of threat. The environment must be safe in order for the students to use higher order thinking skills. This sense of safety is accomplished through the use of guidelines, skills, and procedures that teach and reinforce positive choices and behaviors. The second application is collaboration. It is important to understand and teach the process of group development: inclusion, influence, and community. Collaboration replaces control and is based on mutual respect. The third application is an enriched environment. First hand learning experiences are provided in a stimulating atmosphere. Classrooms are immersed in what

is being learned. Study trips are utilized at the beginning of a unit to peak interest and knowledge rather than as a concluding activity. The fourth application is adequate time. In order to freely process information, time is given to teach and learn patterns of input that create understanding. The fifth application is choices. Teachers and students are given choices regarding how they teach the multiple intelligences, Bloom's taxonomy, differentiate the curriculum, and assess multiple learning performances. The sixth application is meaningful content. Learning is meaningful when skills and content are connected through real world situations. These connections are achieved through experiences that allow students to feel as though they have experienced the knowledge first hand. The seventh application is immediate feedback. Student feedback must be immediate and accurate in order to ensure that the learner is building the correct information in his/her mental programming. The final application is mastery. Authentic assessment is used to show that students understand and can apply what they have learned to the real world. The assessment criteria must determine that the knowledge is complete, correct, and comprehensive. In order to achieve mastery Kovalik's applications must be implemented.

The human brain, according to Parnell (1996) is a computer not a freezer. The teaching strategies used by the teacher demonstrate his/her perspective on the human brain. The teacher with the freezer perspective requires students to commit bits of knowledge to memory in isolation from any practical application. The new knowledge is to be put in the mental freezer until later when it can then be thawed out and used.

Students lack meaning, purpose, and connections with the freezer perspective. In brain based learning, meaning and connections are of the utmost importance. Like a complex computer, the brain has many pathways that must be linked to meaning for understanding to take place. Parnell believes that for teaching to be effective, the student must be motivated to connect the knowledge with the application. Longer school days and calendar years, site-based management, more achievement tests and alternative assessments will not make connections or increase meaningful, long-term learning for students.

Brain-based learning is universal. It does not require a great deal of money or experience. It allows equal access for all students. Students are given the same threat-free, enriched environment with adequate time for learning and performing. Students are immersed in an environment that provides them with the background and experiences necessary to make connections with prior learning. They are given choices that allow them to have success and confidence. Students are encouraged to work together in mutual respect.

A brain-based administrator is a visionary, instructional, collaborative and organizational leader. The vision for the educational leader is to make the instructional environment non-threatening, meaningful, and authentic. Instructional leadership is demonstrated through daily interactions with students, staff, and parents. Leading by example as well as providing professional development for staff about brain compatible classrooms are essential. Collaborating with staff and parents is essential in building trust

and empowering others to follow the school's vision. Providing staff development and reinforcing brain compatible applications are a top priority. Leading in a brain compatible school is an ongoing adventure. Staff development, collaboration, and organization are ongoing. Research changes, educators forget, and things can easily slip back to familiar ways. The administrator must facilitate continuous passion and commitment from his/her staff to utilize the brain-based applications that encourage children to feel excited and engaged in their learning. Educators are often resistant to change and have a hard time trusting in new teaching methods or ideas due to the many educational trends they have lived through. Implementing and keeping up with current brain research will be the biggest challenges for educators and schools. Implications for brain-based learning are exhilarating. It improves students' social skills, listening skills, empathy, confidence, academic skills, life skills, and test scores.

Data Driven Decision Making

The final critical element for exemplary educational leadership is utilizing data driven leadership skills. I believe data driven leadership is essential to student success and school accountability in assuring that every student's learning needs are met. In today's world of *No Child Left Behind*, accountability is crucial. Using reliable student data enables schools to evaluate strengths and weaknesses. This use of data allows a more responsive, fluid curriculum that meets the needs of the students. Every educator should use data to differentiate instruction and teach every student.

As an administrator, I will incorporate research based uses of student data.

Teachers need to utilize research based teaching methods/activities that have been proven to be successful. If research has proven that using read-alouds or choral reading increases reading fluency, then I must lead and instruct my staff in the processes.

My role as a principal is to help teachers to view assessments as an opportunity for feedback and as a crucial part of the instructional process. Guskey (2003) states that assessments should not mark the end of learning. Assessments must be followed by corrective instruction. Too often, busy educators test, correct, and document scores without addressing the misunderstandings students still have. I feel passionate about changing this process. A school-wide system can be designed and implemented which will address the responsible use of assessments in instruction. In the Brazosport, TX Community School District, teachers plan an instructional focus calendar that designates two-week periods when specific reading skills are covered school-wide. The Texas school district uses a model that has three phases: instruction, assessment, and re-teaching or enrichment (Davenport, 2002). There is flexible grouping in the re-teaching or enrichment phase. No student is told that he/she is in the re-teaching or enrichment group. The student is used to flexible grouping and creative teaching methods. The re-teaching is taught differently than the initial instruction and is often seen as a fun session. Brazosport's student data supports the positive results they have claimed. Teachers collaborate to develop activities and to share in the instructional responsibility of all students. In this model, instruction and assessment are not seen as a cause and effect.

Instruction and assessment are viewed as a cyclical process that is done to ensure that every student is successful.

Data needs to be collected, used, and interpreted correctly. As a principal, I will follow Robert Marzano's (2003) ideas to make sure that my school's curriculum is viable and that our assessments are measuring learning from the content that is being taught. Often standardized test results provide data with false conclusions about student learning because the test is not aligned with school curriculum (Marzano, 2003). If the school curriculum is not being measured in the assessment, the data will not be accurate or applicable.

As a principal, I will embrace Marzano's 11 factors that determine student achievement. There are three categories: school-level factors, teacher-level factors, and student-level factors. Marzano's survey gives feedback on the perspectives of the three categories and encourages assessment and communication on why students are or are not achieving at acceptable levels. I believe as an administrator this information will be invaluable. Marzano's survey will allow me to look at other factors that contribute to student achievement such as curriculum, goals, community involvement, and school environment. This survey will allow my staff and I to assess and plan interventions to better meet the needs of our students and increase student achievement.

Data has become somewhat of a dirty word in education due to the negative consequences that are associated with poor test results. If used appropriately, data can and will enable us to teach students more effectively. As an educational leader, I must

ensure that the data used in my building is appropriate. Staff should be trained and given the time necessary to respond effectively. I will need to be a well-organized, instructional leader to ensure my faculty's knowledge and responsible use of assessments and data.

Conclusion

The list for elements that are critical to exemplary leadership is truly endless. I believe that for an administrator the elements change day-by-day and minute-by-minute. The elements of solution focused problem solving, communication with staff, students, parents, and the public, and research based data that leads us and allows us to teach more effectively are critical to being an exemplary administrator. These critical elements will create a positive school culture, a staff that believes that every child can be a successful learner, and a school where every student fulfills his/her highest potential.

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