Personal philosophical perspective on educational leadership for secondary schools: a reflective essay

Deborah L. Padomek

University of Northern Iowa
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Abstract
Every child deserves the best possible education we can provide them. Burdick, Pond, & Yamamoto (1994) found that too many persons leave our educational system at both the secondary and collegiate levels unequipped with the vocational skills, the self-understanding and career decision-making skills, or the work attitudes that are essential for making a successful transition from school to work. It is important to teach students skills necessary for future employment, and also teach them the importance of being critical thinkers and applying previous learning.

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PERSONAL PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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By
Deborah L. Padomek

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Robert H. Decker
Date Approved: Feb. 16, 2000
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson
Date Approved: Feb. 25, 2000
Second Reader of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner
Date Received: Feb. 27, 2000
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
I selected education as a profession because I felt it was very important to our society. Every child deserves the best possible education we can provide them. Burdick, Pond, & Yamamoto (1994) found that too many persons leave our educational system at both the secondary and collegiate levels unequipped with the vocational skills, the self-understanding and career decision-making skills, or the work attitudes that are essential for making a successful transition from school to work. As a vocational education teacher in an alternative school setting, I believe that it is important to teach students skills necessary for future employment, and also teach them the importance of being critical thinkers and applying previous learning. Educator Dale Parnell "strongly believes that good education must prepare young men and women for coping with real life as citizens, wage earners, family members, producers, consumers and life-long learners" (Unger, 1998, p. 40).
VALUES, BELIEFS, PHILOSOPHIES

The focus of vocational education and school-to-work initiatives is the development of survival or life skills, such as communication skills, work habits, job-seeking and job-keeping skills, and interpersonal relations. John Goodlad (1984) believes that vocational education, including guided work experience, is an essential, not merely an elective, part of general education. "Vocational education is for all students, not just an alternative to academic studies for the less academically oriented" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 147). These are skills that any student, whether work bound or college bound, will benefit from. Visher (1998) found that school-to-work is only a recent expression of long-standing efforts to improve education, blur the boundaries between classroom and work-based learning, introduce practical and meaningful applications of academic curriculum, and help students move smoothly and successfully from high school to careers or college. While these basic survival skills are necessary, it is also important for students to see how all of their education is interrelated.
For example, basic literacy, thinking skills, and computational skills are very important in business. 

Unger (1998) found the following:

Most business and industries now are demanding that the men and women they hire for all jobs be skilled in written and verbal communication. . . . Employers also insist that applicants have a firm command of mathematics and basic principles of science, a good knowledge of history and social studies and a command of basic computer operations. (pp. 42-43)

Educators must look beyond their own discipline and classroom to the other courses the students take. They must help their students connect what they learn in class to what they have learned in the other classes and to the real world. Our high schools should not be turned into trade schools, nor should they ignore literature and the lessons of history and geography. However, schools must look beyond the schoolhouse to the roles students will play when they leave to become workers, parents, and citizens. A student’s basic education must include both academic and vocational courses. Goodlad (1984) stated the following:

Here would be the chance for vocational and business courses, for work in the arts, for agriculture and home economics and a thousand other practical fields. As said many times, even these courses are not wholly vocational in intent,
nor is the break complete between them and general education. (p. 138)

True learning comes from critical thinking and judging how and when to use previous knowledge in a new context. Chalupa (1992) found that one of the ways to prepare future employees is to teach students how to think instead of what to think.

I believe that it is crucial for students to learn to think for themselves. According to the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1991), industry and government believe that by age 16 all young people need a three-part foundation of basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities. They need to be able to analyze a problem and determine the most efficient way to solve it. I feel that my job as an educator is to not only teach the content area, but also teach the students how to utilize resources and be self-sufficient. I see myself as a resource and a facilitator of the learning process.

I also believe that it is important for students to recognize the need to apply previous learning. Everything that is learned in school and life is valuable and interrelated. Students must be prepared
for the constant changes in this Age of Information. The pantheist philosopher, Heraclitus, observed that “the only thing that is permanent is change” (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993, p. 304). As I teach my content area in business education, I stress to the students that they are not learning content, but concepts. Learning one specific software does not mean that a student cannot use another software. In fact, much of the software may be obsolete by the time they graduate. The commands may be different, but the concepts will remain constant.

I believe the purpose of schools is to prepare people to become responsible citizens, to help people become economically self-sufficient, and to enhance individual happiness and enrich individual lives. Educational philosopher John Dewey said it this way: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (Phi Delta Kappa, 1996, p. 3).

It is vital to the survival of our democracy that people become responsible citizens. Schools must
educate students to vote intelligently, to act intelligently, and to behave in a reasonable and responsible fashion. They must also encourage students to learn about their individual rights and freedoms, how to protect those rights, and the responsibility that goes along with all this freedom. Students must be taught how to recognize and eliminate political corruption, and the importance of defending our nation from this corruption. In addition, schools must show each student the importance of being a responsible person as a part of our society.

The main freedom that most individuals are concerned about is to be economically self-sufficient. Civil rights leader W.E.B. DuBois wrote: "Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work—it must teach Life" (Phi Delta Kappa, 1996, p. 8). The schools must teach students skills necessary for future employment. Some of these basic survival or life skills, include communication skills, work habits, job-seeking and job-keeping skills, and interpersonal relations. By making students
economically self-sufficient, schools are in turn increasing the national wealth and improving social conditions.

Improving social conditions, leads to enhanced individual happiness and enriched individual lives. How does the school improve social conditions? It is customer driven. At the 1999 National Business Education Convention, speaker John Powers stated that "education is not an educator's world, it is a student's world." The schools must identify what staff, students, parents, and community want and need by developing needs assessments. Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan (1992) found that the trend in education governance is to broaden the base of lay involvement, with more and more influence being exercised by those outside the established educational community (governors, parents, legislators, civic leaders, business elites). From these needs assessments, the school can develop a clear vision, a mission. One that the staff share an understanding of and commitment to. "Without shared dreams, organizations falter and perish" (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 143). It would be my
job as an administrator to connect all these pieces together and make it work.

Schools with a clear vision of instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures, and accountability can more effectively accomplish these purposes. As the poet Carl Sandburg says, "Nothing happens unless first a dream" (Bartlett, 1992, p. 634). If you do not know where you have been you will not know where you are going. "Only by knowing the contributions of those who came before us . . . can you prepare yourself to make the strategic and tactical decisions that will undergird your leadership with steadfast purpose, consistency, and effectiveness" (Owens, 1998, p. 4). An effective school must provide a safe and orderly environment, foster a climate of high expectations for success, provide opportunity to learn, monitor student progress, and maintain positive home/school relations. "The school is to be also, in the eyes of parents and students, a nurturing, caring place. The parents we encountered want their children to be seen as individuals—persons and learners—and to be safe" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 62).
The school climate must be conducive to learning. "The most crucial characteristics of a school are the attitudes and behaviors of the teachers and other staff" (Owens, 1998, p. 93). The schools must provide an environment where students are free from the threat of harm and not oppressive. Students should be free to question what they are learning without retribution.

Bolman and Deal (1992) state:

Control is an illusion. It's seductive because it gives a feeling of power. Something to hold on to. So it becomes addictive. It's hard to give up even when it's not working. You can't start a journey until you let go of habits holding you back. (p. 31)

Teachers must convey a sense of importance about the teaching and learning of essential skills. I feel that if I cannot justify the significance of what I am teaching, then I should not be teaching it. "It's hard to fake it in teaching. Kids make you own up to what you are and what you're trying to do" (Sachar, 1991, p. 327).

Not only should teachers convey the importance of the teaching and learning of essential skills, but they must also set high expectations for success. The staff must believe and demonstrate that all students can
attain mastery of those essential skills. Bloom's dictum states: "What one student can learn, nearly all students can learn" (Chance, 1987, p. 44). It is imperative that all staff members have the capability and enthusiasm to help them do so. Lezotte & Jacoby (1992) found that in effective schools there is a climate of expectation in which the staff believes and demonstrates that all students can attain mastery of the essential school skills and they believe that they have the capability to help all students attain that mastery.

In order for students to be successful, they must be given the opportunity and motivation to learn. Teachers must designate a significant amount of classroom time for instruction of essential skills. Society expects schools to insure that students master basic cognitive skills. Porter & Brophy (1998) state that effective teachers create learning situations in which their students are expected not just to learn facts and solve given problems but to organize information in new ways and formulate problems for themselves. There must be frequent quantitative
monitoring of student progress to assess student skills.

Monitoring of student progress should be used not only to improve individual student performance, but also to improve instructional programs. To accomplish this, they must put more emphasis on assessments that are designed to determine whether students have learned what they were taught, use more frequent assessments so they can adjust instruction, and develop authentic performance based assessments. Teachers and schools must be accountable for what they are teaching and the way they are teaching it. Outcomes-based education (OBE) is a means of organizing for results, basing what we do instructionally on the outcomes we want to achieve. The Minnesota State Department of Education has adopted the following definition of OBE:

Education that is outcome-based is a learner-centered, results-oriented system founded on the belief that all individuals can learn. In this system: 1) What is to be learned is clearly identified; 2) Learners' progress is based on demonstrated achievement; 3) Multiple instructional and assessment strategies are available to meet the needs of each learner; 4) Time and assistance are provided for each learner to reach maximum potential. (Towers, 1992, p. 291)
Accountability helps maintain a positive home/school relationship. Parents need to understand and support the vision of the school and the school must understand and support the vision of the collective parents. Parents must feel that they have an important role in achieving this vision. However, with or without parental involvement a school cannot cease to improve.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Continuous improvement is an unending process that begins with the development of a vision. The administrator, as an educational leader, must lead the development of a shared vision that is future oriented and indicates what the school is striving towards. Leaders are keepers of the vision. In a continuously improving school, the job of leadership is to help those in the organization understand their individual role in implementing the vision. As Joel A. Barker states, “Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes time. Vision with action can change the world” (Bernhardt, 1999, p. 79).

As an educational leader, the principal must express the vision daily not only in words, but most
importantly, through actions. The principal must walk the talk. University of Northern Iowa professor Dr. David Else has stated, "what the principal does on a regular basis over time, will over time, become the most important thing in the school" (D. K. Else, personal communication, August 30, 1999). If the principal sees his/her role in terms of tasks (budgets, schedules, discipline, etc.), so will the staff, and eventually the students and parents. Everyone will be focused on getting "things" done and will be frustrated by interruptions. In contrast, if the principal sees his/her role in terms of people, so will the staff, students, and parents. The learning community will be focused on developing a people orientation and student focus. There will be fulfillment in opportunities to meet the needs of the staff and students, to empower staff, and to help increase student achievement.

An empowering vision is a living document—part of our very nature, part of the way we live our lives day by day. The ultimate goal is to make all aspects of the school consistent and congruent with the vision. As Ralph Waldo Emerson states: "what you do speaks so loudly that no one can hear what you say" (Speck, 1999,
p. 38). It is the job of the administrator to see that this vision is clearly communicated and lived by the administration, staff, students, and parents. According to Bolman & Deal (1992), effective leadership is a relationship rooted in community. Successful leaders embody their group’s most precious values and beliefs. Their ability to lead emerges from the strength and sustenance of those around them. The vision must be observed in action where it matters most—in the classroom and in the form of student learning.

To see the vision in action, the administrator must also serve as a coordinator and support to teachers. He or she should be someone to encourage, believe in the staff and their efforts, help make the staff successful, help staff turn problems into stepping stones, and be part of the solution. Owens (1998) states that leadership as an administrator means working with and through other people to achieve organizational goals. If staff members stray off-course, the administrator must help them find their way back as quickly and painlessly as possible. The
administrator needs to be close to the day-to-day instructional programs and provide feedback. By maintaining day-to-day contact, the administrator helps to build a positive rapport with staff. The most important part of an educational leader is trust and honesty and providing a bridge between parents and teachers, and also between the community and school. "For people to feel significant, he knew the organization had to be 'ours,' not 'mine'" (Bolman & Deal, 1992, p. 99). The most effective administrator will provide this bridge by keeping all parties informed of what the others want and need, and why they are doing what they are doing. "Schools improve when purpose and effort unite. One key is leadership that recognizes its most vital function: to keep everyone's eyes on the prize of improved student learning" (Speck, 1999, p. 60).

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL VISION

Values and beliefs are at the core of who we are, what we do, and how we think and feel. Values and beliefs reflect what is important to us in work and in life. People who live by their conscience experience a deep sense of fulfillment. Stephen Covey (1994)
believes “it really does take courage to just do what we feel we ought to do in the moment of choice” (p. 179). This reflective essay has given me the opportunity to explore and define my values and beliefs and how they shape my personal professional vision as an educational leader.

Throughout my three years in this Educational Leadership Masters Program at the University of Northern Iowa, I have had the opportunity to explore, study, and utilize various leadership skills. What I have learned about myself is that I want to be an educational leader that works with and for people. I want to get out of the office and interact with others in the learning community. Speck (1999) states, “Being visible and deploying oneself helps create a community within the school. As stakeholders see the principal regularly and in a variety of ways they develop a sense of commitment to the work of the learning community” (p. 58). Phillips (1992) also found the following principle for modern leaders:

If subordinates, or people in general, know that they genuinely have easy access to their leader, they’ll tend to view the leader in a more positive, trustworthy light. “Hey,” the followers think, “this guy really wants to
hear from me—to know what I think and what’s really going on. He must be committed to making things work!” (p. 18)

I am committed to making things work. I believe that what I do as a leader will affect students. We are in the business of education and students are our customers. Every decision that is made, every initiative or new program that is implemented, curriculum that is developed, budgets that are planned, etc. should be student focused. As a leader, I must always ask myself and my staff one question: Will this improve learning opportunities for kids? If the answer is no, then we should not be doing it.

Also during this masters program, I have found that regular reflection is a vital part of learning from living and avoiding “fatal errors”. It is a time to review my vision, ask questions and explore possibilities, develop my personal positions and voice, look for connections or conflicts, look for areas of difficulty, build on strengths, and set principle-based goals for professional growth. Abraham Lincoln believed “An often overlooked component of leadership is this ability to learn from people and experiences, from successes and failures. The best leaders never
stop learning” (Phillips, 1992, p. 138). The most important aspect in creating a school’s learning environment is the principal’s commitment to continuous learning. Reflection allows the principal to think about, decide about, and act on current or future practices. It also allows a chance to evaluate how each decision (major or minor) fits within the school vision and mission. If each decision is reflected on (even if only briefly), the overall message to staff and students will be clear, consistent, and on target with the vision and mission. Sergiovanni reinforces that “reflective practice requires that principals have a healthy respect for, be well informed about, and use the best available theory and research and accumulated practice wisdom” (Speck, 1999, p. 35).

I believe that as a principal, the most important skill I will need is the ability to create working relationships with the realization that I will not be able to please all the people all of the time. Ultimately, I must be true to myself—my personal philosophy and perspective on educational leadership. As Goens (1999) stated:
Effective leaders need to be comfortable with themselves as people and as professionals, to be able to withstand the differing expectations. They must be true to their internal spirit, know their values, understand their talents, and comprehend that relationships are fundamental to success in life. (p. 107)

Through the development of this reflective research paper, I have been able to develop and expand my attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills on educational leadership and what schools are. As an administrator, this strong philosophy and value base will enable me to be true to myself, maintain my professional integrity and credibility, avoid "fatal errors", and most importantly, allow me to be confident and not succumb to trying to please everyone.
References


