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2001

A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

My personal philosophy of education is centered on what is best for students and their academic achievement. Kids are #1! My vision is that all people who come in contact with children have the responsibility to help them on a journey to be caring, respectful, life-long learners who are productive citizens of today and tomorrow. Schools should create a safe, comfortable, clean learning environment filled with a palette of eclectic teaching and learning strategies where technology is emphasized and naturally integrated.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Terrie L. Price

March 2001

This Research Paper by: Terrie L. Price

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in Education.

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What makes a successful school leader? A school leader must first sit down and define his/her true values. Then find a position where it is possible to create harmony among his/her professional and personal vision as a school leader. Administrators that are successful are able to balance the leadership and management ends of running an effective school. Good leaders are able to influence people to work for a common goal and look for continuous ways to grow and improve. Principals need to have good people skills to communicate with staff, students, and parents (Convey, 1994). As I move toward a career in educational leadership, it is important to take time to construct a personal philosophy of education based on my core values and essential components which I plan to focus on to become a successful school leader. Leaders must embrace their roles with beliefs, commitment, and internal balance (Speck, 1999). It is crucial that a principal has clarified his/her personal beliefs about school and learning because they will need to look back at them during periods of stress and question.

My core values dwell in the areas of harmony, integrity, understanding, and family. These core values have helped to identify the essential components upon which I will build support. The essential components are school climate, quality curriculum, student achievement, change, and community involvement.

Personal Educational Philosophy

My personal philosophy of education is centered on what is best for students and their academic achievement. Kids are #1! My vision is that all people who come in contact with children have the responsibility to help them on a journey to be caring, respectful, life-long learners who are productive citizens of today and tomorrow. Schools should create a safe, comfortable, clean learning environment filled with a pallet of eclectic teaching and learning strategies where technology is emphasized and naturally integrated. The entire learning community works collaboratively through shared decision-making and open communication to achieve positive change and renewal of best practice in education processes to bring about student achievement. To achieve this goal and focus on essential components this definition for educational leadership serves as a guide. Educational leadership is a process of facilitating discussions of issues, conducting research, engaging in shared decision making, supporting initiatives, and evaluating the effectiveness of the initiatives with the intent of creating a learning community.

School Climate

What are the essential elements of school climate that make the best environment for the entire learning community? School climate addresses many areas such as communication, collaboration, collegiality, shared decision-making, evaluation, and leadership qualities.

Communication

Leaders have expectations in which they communicate on a consistent basis verbally and through their actions. To achieve good communication and shared decision-making, administrators could incorporate three organizational theories when working with people: Douglas McGregor's Theory Y, Likert's Management Systems, and Argyis's Behavior Pattern B. Douglas McGregor's Theory Y (as cited in Owens, 1998) assumes that administrators embrace the following assumptions about the nature of people at work:

1. If it is satisfying to them, employees will view work as natural and as acceptable as play.
2. People at work will exercise initiative, self-direction, and self-control on the job if they are committed to the objectives of the organization.
3. The average person, under proper conditions, learns not only to accept responsibility on the job but also to seek it.
4. The average employee values creativity-that is, the ability to make good decisions-and seeks opportunities to be creative at work. (p. 36)

Likert's Management System 4 is seen as having complete trust and confidence in subordinates reflected in the following definition (as cited in Owens, 1998):

a. Decision-making is widely dispersed.
b. Communication flows up and down and laterally.
c. Motivation is by participation and rewards.
d. Extensive, friendly, superior-subordinate interaction exists.
e. Widespread responsibility for the control process exists.
f. High degree of confidence and trust exists. (p. 39)

Argyris's Behavior Pattern B (as cited in Owens, 1998) explains Theory Y assumptions about people give rise to Behavior Pattern B. This is characterized by commitment to mutually shared objectives, high levels of trust, respect, satisfaction from work, and authentic open relationships. Pattern B leadership may well be demanding, explicit, and thoroughly realistic, but is essentially collaborative.

In these organizational theories commitment is characterized by shared objectives, high levels of trust, respect, satisfaction from work, and open relationships. The overall quality of decision-making and performance will improve as administration and teachers make use of the full range of experience, insight, and creative ability that exists in their schools (Owens, 1998). Leaders must treat others in these ways and have vision and present it in a way that others feel compelled to follow and move their current reality toward a final outcome. A school portfolio and comprehensive school improvement plan are very useful tools if they are developed in a manner that all stakeholders have had input and can buy into them (Bernhardt, 1999). People get a chance to communicate their needs and desires through a well-developed school portfolio and school improvement plan where their input is sought out and used.

Collaboration

What does collaboration mean and how does a school leader establish it? Speck (1999) defines collaboration as "learning communities working together,

breaking down the walls of isolation built by solitary efforts of individuals inside

and outside the school" (p. 104). A school leader attempting to create a

community of learners must provide support, motivation, and encouragement.

McDonald's work in Redesigning School (as cited in Speck, 1999) emphasizes

the difficulty of transforming the organizational context of learning from direct

instruction in isolated classrooms to the community of learners. It is the

exception, not the rule, for a school to have a culture of collaborative sharing

about students, curriculum, instructional and assessment practices, or other critical

educational issues. The principal, teachers, and other staff members must join

together as colleagues, rather than work in isolation if a school is to become a

learning community focused on students' learning (Speck, 1999). Collegiality

entails high levels of collaboration among members of a group, such as principals,

teachers, and staff members. It is characterized by mutual respect, shared work

values, cooperation, and specific conversations about teaching and learning

(Sergiovanni, 1995). Little (as cited in Speck, 1999) notes that collegiality in

school has four specific behaviors:

1. Adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations about
   teaching and learning are frequent, continuous, concrete, and precise.
2. Adults in schools observe each other engaged in the practice of
   teaching and administration. These observations become the practice
   to reflect on and talk about.
3. Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing,
   researching, and evaluating curriculum.
4. Adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching,
   learning, and leading. Craft knowledge about teaching and learning

are revealed, articulated, and shared. There is a constant atmosphere of interaction among staff about teaching and learning. (p. 28)

A principal must first become a colleague and clearly communicate to all staff members the improvements that collegiality can bring to the school. Principals can plant the seeds of collegiality and then make sure they grow by reinforcing its importance daily in discussions with teachers and other staff members and by exhibiting it in daily actions. Principals can seize and create opportunities to repeat, restate, and clarify expectations. Principals and teachers can ask the questions and the learning community can explore possible solutions.

Shared Decision-Making

How can a school leader create shared decision-making, and what does it look like? A school leader must empower teachers and staff members to lead and share in decision making to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk's study (as cited in Speck, 1999) revealed that:

Strong professional communities show high levels of teacher autonomy. Researchers suggest that teachers with more discretion regarding their work feel more responsible for how well their students learn. The flexibility allows them to respond to specific needs they see. Instead of being guided by rules, they are guided by the norms and beliefs of the professional community. (p. 5)

Organizations need to have loyalty when members work collaboratively in decision-making. Loyalty means being honest and supportive in interactions and always being sensitive to the emotional needs of others. To foster loyalty, a

school leader can actively listen to the diverse opinions of others. Effective

organizations develop guiding principles to deal with disagreement.

In the leadership course the group developed this statement of loyalty:

> As district employees we will demonstrate support for our school mission
> and refrain from public criticism of other school employees. Our actions
> will reflect our core values. In times of disagreement we will attempt to
> engage in open dialogue while preserving the dignity of others. Personal
> issues will be dealt with on a personal level.

A school leader must keep in mind that people are going to have conflict,

that is only natural, and how it is dealt with is important to the balance of the

entire learning community. Addressing the problem, not the person during the

disagreement must be kept at the forefront. When personnel work together they

should try to create a win-win process, where decisions are made that benefit all

in interactions. All involved in a decision should seek first to understand, then to

be understood which keeps respect, humility, and authenticity as the guiding

principles. The focus ought to be less concerned about who is right and more

concerned about what is right. Synergy is valuing the difference and searching

for a third alternative. As a result synergy is the fruit of thinking win-win and

seeking first to understand. Therefore synergy is not just compromise; it is

creation of a third alternative that is genuinely better than compromise. It is

creation of a third alternative that is also better than solutions individuals could

ever come up with on their own (Convey, 1994).

Margaret Wheatley (cited in Bernhardt, 1999) states "People support what they create" (p. 9). It is important that when consensus on issues cannot be reached, dissenters should become part of the problem-solving effort. Groups must keep in mind that everyone needs to work proactively through disagreement for the best interest of the organization. School leaders can foster shared decision making to build harmony by having open dialogue, clarifying expectations, and actively engaging all.

Evaluation

How might an administrator make evaluation an effective process that helps teachers improve student achievement? The best leaders are in touch with what is going on all around them. Peter and Waterman (1982) coined the idea of Managing by Wandering Around (MBWA), which is simply the process of stepping out and interacting with people and establishing human contact. Peter and Nancy Austin (cited in Peter & Waterman, 1982) state MBWA is "the technology of the obvious" (p. 78):

> It is being in touch, with customers, suppliers, and your people. It facilitates innovation, and makes possible the teaching of values to every member of an organization. Listening, facilitating, teaching, and reinforcing values. What is this except leadership? Thus, MBWA is the technology of leadership. Leading is primarily paying attention. The masters of the use of attention are also not only masters of symbols, of drama, but master storytellers and myth builders. (p. 78)

The MBWA style fosters communication, visibility, and open-door policy. Phillips (1992) brings up another important principle. If people know that they

genuinely have easy access to their leaders, they'll tend to view the leader in a more positive, trustworthy light. School leaders need to go into the classrooms on a daily basis to establish the contact and create the trust. In studies that differentiated effective schools from others Smith and Piele (cited in Daft, 1999) found principals that participated extensively in classroom instructional programs and even in teaching were respected more by teachers. Joel W. Ebert (personal communication, Fall, 1999) uses the evaluation concept of "share teach" which enables a principal to get into the classroom. "Share teach" is when the principal goes into the classroom and teaches a lesson and the teacher observes and then the teacher teaches a lesson while the principal observes. Through discussions on the lessons the principal and teacher decide together what effective teaching is and how the class learns best. " Share teach" would be an excellent way to get into the classroom more and see what is taking place. The principal must step into the role of educator and always stay in touch with students and their needs and teachers and their needs. The "share teach" model trains faculty members to look at teaching and work toward improvement to move closer to the vision of effective teaching. Senge (as cited in O'Neil, 1995): "Creating a reflective environment and degree of safety where individuals can rediscover what they really care about is an important step in the process" (p. 20-23). The whole issue of being reflective is very important to the creation of a learning community where each person's thoughts and actions are valued (Speck, 1999). School

leaders can use share-teaching and reflective time to help themselves develop into charismatic leaders. School leaders must foster risk-taking and reflection as part of evaluation. Staff could develop professional improvement commitments with time lines and support to reach their goals and grow as professionals.

Teachers could support each other to reach professional goals by using peer coaching and mentoring. Mentoring and peer coaching build bonds between members of a learning community while providing a support system for staff members. Staff can generate insights and strategies that improve practice (Lambert, 1998). Peers can observe each other and give objective nonevaluative feedback focusing on delivery of curriculum.

Leadership Qualities

What qualities do successful leaders exhibit and how do they put them into action in the school? Sergiovanni stated " The only thing that makes the leader special is that she/ he is a better follower: better at articulating the purpose of the community: more passionate about goals, more willing to take time to pursue them" (as cited in Brandt, 1992, p. 46). School leaders need to be highly motivated people who strive for challenges and are driven to get the most out of every situation while establishing a reputation for doing quality work that is coupled with a passion for excellence.

Over 800 interviewed teachers detailed that their school leaders influence and empower them by using the power of praise, articulation of expectations,

involvement of teachers in the decision-making, extending autonomy, leading by standing behind, gentle nudges, positive use of formal authority, and use of positive personality characteristics (Blasé & Kirby, 1992). When an educational leader gives praise it is important to (a) be sincere, (b) maximize the use of nonverbal communication, (c) schedule time in a busy day for teacher recognition, (d) write brief personal notes to compliment individuals, (e) show pride in teachers by boasting, (f) praise briefly, and (g) target praise to teachers' work. When principals stand behind their teachers they provide the material and financial support, support in student discipline, and protection for instructional time. If a school leader expects teachers to be caring, responsible, individuals who give praise and have high moral character they must model these behaviors consistently (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

Ferguson (1990) has a poem in the book, The Edge called "Little Eyes Upon You" which is key for school leaders to remember.

> There are little eyes upon you and they're watching night and day. There are little ears that quickly take in every word you say. There are little hands all eager to do anything you do; and a little boy who's dreaming of the day he'll be like you. You're the little fellow's idol; you're the wisest of the wise. In his little mind about you no suspicions ever rise. He believes in you devoutly, holds all that you say and do; he will say and do, in your way, when he's grown up like you. There's a wide-eyed little fellow who believes you're always right; and his eyes are always opened, and he watches day and night. You are setting an example every day in all you do, for the little boy who's waiting to grow to be like you. (p. 8-7)

Leaders can extend leadership in the school and give teachers autonomy by building leadership capacity. Leadership capacity is broad-based skillful involvement in the work of leadership. Leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. Study teams can take responsibility for researching and making recommendations thus letting people have that sense that their ideas really do matter (Lambert, 1998).

Quality Curriculum

What is quality curriculum? Quality curriculum needs to be supported by sound research. Guidelines for developing quality curriculum are cited in Glatthorn (1997). The curriculum should be structured so that it results in greater depth and less superficial coverage. Several studies, for example, conclude that focusing in-depth on a smaller number of skills and concepts will lead to greater understanding and retention and will also be more supportive of efforts to teach problem solving and critical thinking (Brophy, 1990; Knapp & Associates, 1991; McDonnell, 1989).

Quality curriculum is also structured so that it focuses on problem solving. Cognitive psychology indicates clearly that skills are learned and retained when they are embedded in problem-solving units that deal with complex meaningful problems situated in a context (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989). The curriculum should be structured in a way that employs alternative teaching methods to develop multiple intelligences and significant learner differences. Curriculum that

provides for multi-year sequential study rather than "stand-alone" courses is more successful than the traditional single fragmented courses (Mc Donnel, 1989). When districts develop curriculum it should focus on what students should know and be able to do. Educators must recognize that the starting point of learning is what students already know. Teachers need to relate learning to students' prior knowledge, so students understand what they read, hear, and see. Students that successfully make connections with prior knowledge and new knowledge are able to transfer learned knowledge into long-term memory (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999).

Effective teaching combines emotion, self-reflection, and mystery. Glasser (1969) believes that schools will continue to fail until material and teaching start with the emotional bridge to relevance. Emotion is necessary in school material and in presentation. " Laughter, shouting, loud unison responses, even crying, are a part of any good learning experience and should be heard from every class" (p. 56). Another key component of quality curriculum is that it contains opportunity and time for self-reflection. Students' wonderful ideas are built on other wonderful ideas. Subjects are taught in a manner where subjects are uncovered rather than covered. Duckworth (1996) notes, "A teacher's job is to raise questions about even simple answers, to slow down closure, and to push the limits, to see where ideas hold up" (p. 78).

Curriculum needs to be evaluated for quality. Criteria should be used in the designing of a comprehensive evaluation. "The curriculum should develop the knowledge base of the subjects, be developmentally appropriate, goal-orientated, balanced, integrated, reinforce skills, open-ended, responsive to the needs of all learners, and productive" (Glatthorn, 1997, p. 31). Quality curriculum meets educational goals of the community and aligns goals with programs and subjects. Through authentic assessment and standardized testing if the curriculum supports tested areas, improvement should be seen (Stiggins, 2001).

<div align="center">Student Achievement</div>

How can student achievement be measured and used to benefit students? The focus on school improvement is on creating a comprehensive learning organization that understands, cares about, and works for students. School leaders must work to prevent student failure as opposed to reactively implementing the latest innovations or taking a fire-fighting approach to making decisions that affect student learning (Bernhardt, 1999). Schools need to establish clear targets for academic success, in other words schools should have clear goals of the knowledge they expect students to learn and the skills in which the students should be proficient.

Through performance assessment tasks students can take learned knowledge and skills and apply them to very real situations. Ferguson (1990)

quotes John F. Kennedy as saying: " I firmly believe we are put on earth to be tested-to be challenged with adversity and to see what we can accomplish. The successful person is the one who continually faces problems and challenges that life brings..."(p. 2-29). Problem solving is a huge part of a quality curriculum and tells a lot about student achievement, so authentic testing has merit. Glatthorn (1997) says, "As the learner is solving problems, he or she is experiencing a cognitive apprenticeship; by observing and imitating the teacher or more sophisticated peers, the learner is expanding his or her repertoire of problem-solving skills, testing knowledge claims, and developing greater understanding" (p. 27).

Bernhardt (1998) notes that schools can improve student achievement if they collect data and analyzed it to:

1. Improve instruction.
2. Provide students with feedback on their performance.
3. Gain common understanding of what quality performance is and how close we are to achieving it.
4. Measure program success and effectiveness.
5. Understand if what we are doing is making a difference.
6. Make sure students "do not fall through the cracks."
7. Know which programs are getting the results we want.
8. Get to the "root causes" of problems.
9. Guide curriculum development and revision.
10. Promote accountability.
11. Meet state and federal requirements. (pp. 8-9)

Data must drive school improvement in order for it to be useful and effective. Research helps determine what students have learned, what aptitude

they possess for future learning, how well they are progressing toward specific

educational goals, how they feel toward school, and what aspirations and interests

they may have (Whorten, White, Fan, & Sudweeks, 1999).

<div align="center">Change</div>

How can school leaders bring about change? "Change, even if

predictable, is almost always perceived as threatening" (James, 1996, p. 104).

Firestone and Corbett (as cited in Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993) notes tasks that

principals can perform to facilitate successful change include obtaining resources,

buffering the project from outside interference, encouraging and supporting staff,

and modifying standards operating to fit the project where necessary. Fullan's

study (as cited in Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993) found that the presence of four

characteristics enhances the potential for successful implementation: necessity,

clarity, complexity, and practicality. Necessity requires a change intervention.

Those implementing the change should be clear about the purpose of the change

and the procedures for implementing it.

Clark, Lotto, and Astuto (as cited in Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993) note that

an innovation is more likely to be adopted if it is simple, that is, easy to

understand and use. An innovation, however, is more likely to be implemented if

it is complex, that is, if it is perceived as being ambitious. In addition, Fullan (as

cited in Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993) finds practicality essential for the change.

Practicality can be thought of as the extent to which innovation is capable of

being put into practice. Berman and McLaughlin (as cited in Kowalski &

Reitzug, 1993) find through research on change that teachers need to be actively

involved in decisions in order to adopt change interventions. Clark, Lotto, and

Astuto (as cited in Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993) argue that it is more essential for

teachers to be involved at the stage where the change most directly affects them.

School leaders must be prepared to answer questions like: How will the change

affect me? What benefits does the change hold for me? What will the change

mean to my life?

School leaders can benefit from learning about change to reduce it to the

least threatening process. Leaders need to make sure people's needs are being

met during the change because people are unable to work for higher needs unless

lower needs are met which is known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Draft,

1999). School leaders can satisfy needs of people by offering leadership

opportunities, recognition, study groups, and autonomy. School leaders need to

have all stakeholders affected by change involved in the process.

<div align="center">Community Involvement</div>

How can schools benefit from community involvement and promote it?

Schools can work to actively involve businesses, community, and parents in the

education of students. Students can understand why they need to know the

information they are learning in school, and how the knowledge is applied in real

job situations when teachers actually involve business in their teaching

(Bernhardt, 1999). Apple computer executive (as cited in Bernhardt, 1999) notes "Partnerships between education and businesses are key to reaching the shared goals of finding new ways to prepare a work force for the twenty-first century and encouraging lifelong learning" (p. 146).

Community involvement also provides the school learning community with rich resources of expertise, experience, application, and opportunities for community service. The principal can meet with various representatives of the community including the Chamber of Commerce, city and county government, service clubs, citizens' groups, churches, businesses, and other groups that represent the diversity of the community. School leaders can encourage teachers and staff members to find a variety of ways to make connections to the surrounding community (Speck, 1999). The school could host a Senior Friends Day that actively involves community members and grandparents.

Involving parents is very important since as a result " Family structures play one of the most essential roles in the educational process. They provide the environment in which students learn, the discipline and the dedication needed to be successful, not only in school but also in life" (Bernhardt, 1999, p. 149). A learning community can benefit greatly from developing open communication lines with parents before the school year starts. For the last seven years, I have conducted home visits before each school year gets under way. A home visit is an opportunity for a teacher to meet with the parents and the student in their home

before the school year starts. The visit gives the teacher a chance to get to know

the student and family. The teacher also gets to share what expectations he/she

has for both students and parents. The teacher can learn a lot about parents'

expectation for hard work, achievement, and learning as well. The home visit can

also provide a time for the school to "sell its programs" to parents and share

school improvement plans and goals. School leaders can support teachers in

home visits by also participating in them and actively helping teachers to

communicate with parents. Schools need to involve the family as much as

possible in education, and sometimes that takes not only educating the student,

but also educating the parent. Schools can help parents develop children that

come to school with good self-concept and self-esteem. Parents can develop and

help schools reinforce the essential learning goals through providing the support

students need.

Coloroso (1994) refers to the "backbone family:"

> The backbone families can be described by what they are not:
> They are not hierarchical, bureaucratic, or violent. Backbone
> parents don't demand respect-they demonstrate and teach it.
> Children learn to question and challenge authority that is not life
> giving. They learn that they can say no, that they can listen and be
> listened to, that they can be respectful, and respected themselves.
> Children of backbone families are taught empathy and love for
> themselves and others. By being treated with compassion
> themselves they learn to be compassionate toward others, to
> recognize others' suffering, and to be willing to help relieve it.
> The backbone family provides the consistency, firmness, and
> fairness as well as the calm and peaceful structure needed for
> children to flesh out their own sense of a true self. Rather than

being subjected to power expressed as control and growing up to control others, children are empowered and grow up to pass what they have learned of the potential of the human spirit on to others. (p. 50)

School leaders and teachers need to include parents in the education of their children. Teachers may choose to increase communication with parents through notes, e-mail, newsletters, narratives, telephone calls, and frequent parent conferences. Parents can be invited into the school to help with teaching new skills and providing extra one-on-one help for students. Mentoring programs for parents and community members can promote community involvement.

<u>Conclusion</u>

When I do become an administrator and I walk into my office that very first day, I will remember what it was like to be a teacher and a student in school and keep that close to my heart. I think it is important to walk in someone else's shoes and that's why the share-teach strategy would be good for keeping in touch.

As a leader, I must continually seek to take risks, go beyond my comfort zone, change, and strive for improvement. In this paper I have identified my core values and how they have helped me identify key components to focus on as a school leader. I know that going into a principalship, it is difficult to please people all of the time. I will need to make decisions in a manner that is best for children and their achievement. My decisions will be made with honesty and integrity. I must make decisions that are clearly thought through and involve

other stakeholders as much as possible. I will have the courage to handle unjust criticism and admit when I'm wrong. I will be decisive when I need to be, and I will preach the vision and continually keep my eye on the horizon (Phillips, 1992).

When I enter a leadership role, I will remember that not everything can be learned in a day. Patience will be the key to success, and I will use my core values to develop a positive learning community. I will be reflective in my leadership because experiences without reflection lose their value. I will learn from my experiences and actively seek the expert knowledge of others. I will find a mentor! Daresh and Playko (1990) state, " There may be no more powerful form of instruction available than one-on-one relationships that develop between a mentor and protégé" (p. 47). I realize that I have just begun to explore school leadership. Most importantly, I know to be an effective leader, I must be a life-long learner who is willing to change and learn from others.

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A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in Education.

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Head, Department of Educational
Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education