

1998

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Rogers, Ed, "A perspective of the position of an elementary principal : a reflective essay" (1998). *Graduate Research Papers*. 1410.

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A perspective of the position of an elementary principal : a reflective essay

Abstract

As I implement my leadership vision, I will become the keeper of the rules; the protector of broken hearts and disappointed dreams; the provider of unyielding encouragement and relentless motivator to help kids so they can reach beyond themselves; and the helper of people to develop friendships and respect for others, and to become responsible citizens. Most of all, I hope I will become the kind of role model which touches lives and helps lead them in a wonderful direction in life.

A PERSPECTIVE OF THE POSITION OF AN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Post Secondary
Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Art in Education

by

Ed Rogers

May, 1998

This Research Paper by: Ed Rogers

Entitled: A PERSPECTIVE OF THE POSITION OF AN ELEMENTARY
PRINCIPAL:

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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5-12-98

Date Received

What did I believe the position of an elementary principal to be as I began the process of becoming a principal? Much of what I currently think about principals and their position have been shaped by the relationships I have had with various principals throughout my life. One of the first recollections I have of a principal making an impression on my life occurred while I was attending first grade in a brand new school in Northern California. Grass had not yet been sewn on the playground, so there were plenty of rocks around. I thought the rocks were perfect for throwing. Everything was just fine until a kid stopped one of my rocks with his head. I was immediately taken to the principal's office where I sat in an oversized chair and listened as the principal talked on the phone to my mother. When he was finished talking, he asked me to remove the belt from my pants. I did. He then gave me three swats with my own belt for throwing rocks and hitting a kid. At this point in my life, I began to believe principals were the keepers and enforcers of rules.

The next recollection I have about principals and their position occurred after a terrible accident happened to my dad; which left him in a hospital for a year and in a wheelchair his entire life. This principal brought me into his office where my mother was waiting. He and my mother began to explain what had happened to my dad. Not only did he comfort me with his words, he held me and assured me he and the teachers would be there for my family and me as we would need comforting in the coming months. This was the point in my life when I began to believe principals were the protectors of broken hearts and disappointed dreams.

When I attended junior high school, another principal affected my life and helped to establish some of my current beliefs. Being of the junior high age, I had become somewhat selfish and cocky, and not at all interested in other people's

welfare. This attitude I possessed made it difficult for others to be around me. The principal of this school had taken a liking to me and helped me to come to my senses about how I was treating others. He even encouraged me to get involved in sports and community service programs. I did, and how I changed for the better. I then began to believe principals were providers of unyielding encouragement and were relentless motivators to help kids become everything they could be.

After I entered high school, I had a unique opportunity to develop a friendship with my high school principal. Obviously, at times, this friendship followed us into the hallways of school. Many times during my years in high school, this principal helped me make some wise decisions which kept me out of trouble and pointed me in the right direction. I then began to believe principals were key role models who exhibit friendship, respect, wisdom, and honor.

As the years continued and I finished college, I landed my first teaching position and went to work for my first principal. I gained new insights about the job and position of principals during this time. Many of my previous beliefs were tested because this “boss” possessed few of the skills I believed were necessary to be a good principal. I quickly figured out, and began to believe that it is a person’s character that makes them into an inferior or superior principal.

Fortunately, after that experience, I went to work for another school district where I was most graciously mentored by a wonderful principal. He encouraged me to stand up and to be a leader; not only as a teacher, but in character too. I then came to the belief that the position and job of a principal is governed by how a person envisions it to be.

So, looking through my past experiences, I have come to believe that helping people keep the rules, being tenderhearted and caring, encouraging and motivating, and demonstrating good character, respect, and honor towards others are some of the many facets of being a good educational leader.

After wrestling with understanding these concepts, I came to a point where I decided to take on the challenge of becoming a principal; a leader in education. I wanted be the keeper of the rules, the protector of broken hearts and disappointed dreams. I also wanted to be a provider of unyielding encouragement and be the relentless motivator to help kids so they can reach beyond themselves.

Furthermore, I wanted to help people develop friendships and respect for others, and to become responsible citizens. Most of all, I wanted to be the kind of role model which touches a life that leads a person in a wonderful direction; as others have done for me.

Now that I have started the process of becoming a principal, I will continue to develop my personal vision of what I foresee the position of the “principalship” to be. This paper is a consideration of what I believe now. I am certain, as I grow as a person and an educational leader, some of my beliefs will change. Knowing this in advance, I have considered my previous beliefs and have begun to blend them together with the information and skills I learned through my administration course work. The following areas are the results of my work and have helped me to establish what I think embodies the person and position of a school principal: (a) the personal characteristics of the person, (b) the knowledge about the position (c) the personal and professional vision a person brings to the administration

practice, and (d) How a person puts his/her vision all together to make things work successfully.

The Character of the Principal

Like so much of Western culture, the traditional understanding of character arises primarily from two sources: the classical and the biblical. Common to each is the assumption that the only significant test of what you believe is how you live. Both wisdom and goodness exist only in actions in the real world. Daniel Taylor (1996) believes, "Character is values lived" (p. 76) .

The goal of philosophical ethics for the last 200 years has been to find that rational basis for morality -- on which, presumably, all reasonable people can agree. The attempt fizzled. As MacIntyre (1981) notes in his widely influential book After Virtue, reasonable people have not even been able to agree on what constitutes moral behavior, much less actually find a way to ensure it. Because we no longer share a common moral tradition, we repeatedly talk past each other on moral issues. Therefore, we are left sifting the fragments of many traditions for an alternative to radical, relativistic individualism. The only universally approved virtue today is tolerance, yet we are increasingly aware that we are doomed if we tolerate everything (MacIntyre, 1981). In addition, students of ethics are unanimous on one point: moral leadership begins with moral leaders. Gardner (1995) says of great leaders they embody the message they advocate; they teach, not just through words, but through actions. I believe strongly that a person must draw a line on their character. I think, a person should know in advance and be committed to their stance on character. To do so, one will be less likely to waiver when tempted to act contradictory to what their character suggests.

I agree resolutely with Taylor (1995) who believes: “Character is not something you have; it is something you are and that inevitably shows itself in what you do” (p. 30) . It is determined by the stories of which you are a part. Furthermore, I agree that when we worry about our character and that of our children -- and we should -- we ought to think of stories. We should more purposefully choose the stories in which we are characters. Without meaningful choices there is no story and no character. But how should we make those character choices? A traditional answer, approved by both Aristotle and Christ, has been that we pattern our choices and our lives after someone we want to be like. And that person is often presented to us in a story.

The key to every good plot is characters making choices. Choices instill values - right and wrong, good and evil, true and false, wise and foolish. We must be characters in life-defining stories that make it matter that we were ever here. If our present story is inadequate, we must choose to be different characters in a different story (Taylor, 1995). I believe the ultimate author of such a story is God who made and loves us and calls us to himself. We must look to the Author of character to help us build in ourselves what we were created to be and do.

The New Testament brings to the forefront qualities of character that are implicit in the Old Testament and that go beyond the classical understanding. These too grow out of the nature of God as reflected in his creatures: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Another place among many where God reveals the character traits he requires is Psalm 15. The psalm opens with a question: “Oh Lord, who may approach your holy place? Who may worship on your holy

mountain?" (Psalm 15:1). That is, what are the virtues a person should bring into God's presence? The psalmist then answers the question in the rest of the psalm, part of which reads as follows: "Those who walk blamelessly, live righteously and speak truth from the heart. Those who do not gossip or wrong neighbors or speak evil of those around them" (Psalm 15:2-3).

Covey (1990), who has inspired many to become principle-centered leaders and thinkers, defines character as: (a) integrity (habits are congruent with values, words with deeds, expressions with feelings); (b) maturity (the balance between courage and consideration); and (c) abundance mentality (a deep inner sense of personal worth and security). These three character traits are essential to primary greatness for leaders. Likewise a person's character is constantly radiating and communicating. From it, people come to trust or distrust you. Furthermore, Covey also concludes: if your life runs hot and cold, if you're both caustic and kind, if your private performance doesn't square with your public performance, people won't open up to you, even if they want and need your love or help. They won't feel safe enough to expose their opinions and tender feelings.

As I work towards the goal of being an educational leader, I have come to the conviction that the personal character of a principal is the most important aspect of being an effective and successful leader. The Bible teaches, "The righteous man leads a blameless life." and "He who pursues righteousness and love finds life, prosperity, and honor" (Proverbs 21:7, 21). I also think that having honor, virtue, and integrity will make a leader stand apart from the rest of the crowd, and will allow him/her to make unbiased decisions. Lashway (June, 1996) suggests that honesty is the quality most appreciated by subordinates. And any principal who has

launched a risky new program or has publicly shouldered the blame for someone else's mistake can testify to the importance of courage. These character traits will also allow a leader to be focused on what is at hand, and not what is falling apart around them because of some misdeed done in their life. Additionally, I believe that a leader who has integrity will empower others to believe and trust in themselves and in their experience. This in turn will begin to develop what Lebow (1990) describes as an heroic environment where everyone experiences success through: (a) uncompromising truth; (b) lavishing trust on each other; (c) mentoring unselfishly; (d) being receptive to new ideas, regardless of their origin; (e) taking personal risks for the organization's sake; (f) giving credit where credit is due; (g) not touching dishonest dollars; (h) and putting the interests of others before their own.

Finally, I believe all people should be above reproach, especially leaders. Educational leaders should not take advantage of the trust given to them. For if they do, they have made a mockery of the very foundation of education. Furthermore, I believe the educational system is the establishment that communities trust to help people develop abilities to govern themselves (character), learn more about their world and its technology (knowledge), and to find clues to their origin (self-fulfillment). I think if a principal wants to nurture these aspirations in a community, the principal needs to have impeccable character. I believe, as does Covey (1990), the key to real influence is a person's example, his/her conduct with others. A person's example flows naturally out of character, or the kind of person they truly are. Most importantly, the principal must not only behave responsibly as an individual, but must create an ethical institution.

Knowledge of How to be Effective

Character is the quality that embeds itself into every aspect of a person's personality, and will affect everything they know, communicate, and do. Having knowledge to be effective is of great importance and value to an educational leader. Especially, because the roles of principals in the instructional development of schools vary, but each component is equally important.

To be effective, principals should play a variety of roles. Niece (1993), found three major themes in his qualitative research on effective instructional leaders: (a) effective instructional leaders are people oriented and interactional; (b) instructional leaders should also model their beliefs; and (c) effective instructional leaders function within a network of other principals.

I agree with Niece (1993) that effective instructional leaders "are people oriented and interactional" (p.13) . These principals did not let themselves become secluded and isolated from the day-to-day operations of the school. They interacted regularly with all people in the school and remained visible and accessible. To be as successful as possible, effective instructional leaders must make it a point to visit classrooms daily. These visits should be structured to show that they have meaning and purpose. They validate the idea that classrooms are where the truly important activities in a school occur and that instructional leadership is the most critical responsibility of the school principal. Whitaker (1997) describes these visits as administrative monitoring or "drop-in supervision" (p.2) . Their purpose should be to see teachers at work under normal conditions; they should be learning-centered, with emphasis on the teacher's purpose, the learning experience, and the atmosphere of the classroom. The visits are very informal in nature compared with

the formal evaluation approach. They can last anywhere from five to fifteen minutes and require no systematic approach by the principal. Afterwards, the administrator must provide feedback to the teacher and use the observational data as part of an ongoing assessment of the instructional program and climate of the school.

Principal's will never have a sense of the school unless they immerse themselves in the atmosphere beyond the office door.

Niece (1993) also believes instructional leaders should model their beliefs. Just as teachers need to model appropriate responses and behaviors for their students; the principal must model such actions to teachers, parents, and other staff members as well as to students. Principals cannot effectively do this without becoming an integral part of the daily operations of their schools. The principal should greet students and staff in the morning. This could mean standing outside the front door with their morning coffee or it could mean strolling through the halls to greet teachers by their classrooms and students at their lockers. Sharing welcoming statements allows everyone to start the day in a positive fashion. It also allows principals the opportunity to model appropriate interpersonal interactions for the entire school community.

Finally, Niece (1993) believes effective instructional leaders “function within a network of other principals” (p. 13) . Principals should make sure they keep in close contact with their peers, on both a formal and informal level. I think this kind of collegiality will keep a principal from feeling isolated and unsupported, and will allow for exchanging of ideas about education in a safe environment.

Smith and Andrews (1989) identified three other areas of strategic interaction conducted by instructional leaders that I think will lead to higher levels of

effectiveness. Those areas are: resource provider, instructional resource, and communicator. I believe that in having the knowledge and practicing these concepts, principals will enhance their effectiveness as leaders.

I agree with Smith and Andrews (1989) that teachers are the school's greatest resource, and they must be acknowledged for exemplary teaching and encouraged to share with others. The principal must know the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers and show genuine concern for their health, welfare, and professional growth. This caring approach creates a faculty willing to take risks and approach change positively.

I also believe along with Smith and Andrews (1989) that in being an instructional resource, the principal identifies good teaching and provides feedback that promotes professional growth. I think this is very important if the community of teachers want to be the best at their skills. In addition, teachers do not often have access to telephones or service providers as readily as principals. Principals have contacts in other school districts and can invite them as experts for curricular ideas and staff development. This teacher support structure is vital to the relationship of administrator and staff. When staff know and feel supported, there will be a greater chance of shared ideas, values, and vision to be promoted and acted upon.

Finally, I concur with Smith and Andrews (1989) that being a good communicator is equally vital to climate in a school building. The principal must communicate to the staff essential beliefs that (a) all children can learn and experience success, (b) success builds upon success, (c) schools can enhance student success, and (d) learner outcomes must be clearly defined to guide instructional programs and decisions. From these communication points, I conclude

that the process of understanding the direction of the collective vision can be followed and maintained. I think communication also includes listening. Deal and Peterson (1994) believe principals shape school culture by listening carefully for the deeper dreams that the school community holds for the future. In the process, they play the roles of historian, poet, healer, and anthropological detective. In short, running a school does not seem to require all-or-nothing strategic choices. Effective leadership is multidimensional.

Personal and Professional Vision

Since effective leadership is multidimensional, it is very important that principals have a professional vision of what they want effective leadership and education to be in their building. Creating a vision can be difficult. If it is done in isolation and without input from others, it may never gain allegiance from the people it will effect. However, I believe this must not dissuade anyone from creating and implementing a school wide vision or pathway to effective leadership. Peterson (1995) observes schools as complex places, and teaching as a difficult and challenging job. Many schools do not have a clear and shared sense of purpose focused on student learning. Yet, without it, programs become fragmented, teachers lose motivation, and improvement efforts fail. Without a clear notion of what is important, work can become dissipated and undirected. Without a clear sense of direction, planning and decision making about programs, curricula and instruction can remain uncoordinated.

Lashway (April, 1996) notes that ten years ago, principals were asked to become "instructional leaders," (p.1) exercising firm control by setting goals, maintaining discipline, and evaluating results. Today they are encouraged to be

"facilitative leaders" by building teams, creating networks, and "governing from the center" (p.1) . Beck and Murphy (1993) observe that the metaphors of school leadership have changed frequently over the years; no sooner have school leaders assimilated one recommended approach then they are seemingly urged to move in a different direction. I think schools are likely to be more successful in achieving in-depth learning when leaders work with staff and the community to build a collective educational vision that is clear, compelling, and connected to teaching and learning. This collective vision helps focus attention on what is important, motivates staff and students, and increases a sense of shared responsibility for student learning. I agree with Stolp (1991) that successful leaders have learned to view their organizations' environment in a holistic way. This wide-angle view is what the concept of school culture offers principals and other leaders. It gives them a broader framework for understanding difficult problems and complex relationships within the school. By deepening their understanding of school culture, leaders will be better equipped to shape the values, beliefs, and attitudes necessary to promote a stable and nurturing learning environment.

This leads us to the necessary question, what is a vision? Bennis and Nanus (1986), two of the classic writers on leadership, describe how vision functions:

To choose a direction, a leader must first have developed a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization. This image, which we call a vision, may be as vague as a dream or as precise as a goal or mission statement. The critical point is that a vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important ways than what now exists. (p.89)

Peterson (1995) believes that school leaders should develop a clear, educationally focused vision and a well-defined mission statement, collaborating with school staff and community members to agree on the type of learning, beliefs, and goals that are important. A vision means an image of what the school can and should become. It is deeply embedded in values, hopes, and dreams. A mission statement is more specific and often defines the purpose of a school. It can be developed from the vision itself. Goals and objectives are still more specific and concrete, are derived from the vision, and can be used to focus change and improvement efforts. It is extremely important to have a path to follow because if you aim for nothing, you'll hit it every time.

Deal and Peterson (1994) suggest several key ways to establish, communicate, and articulate the vision, including: (a) expressing the vision in an engaging, unusual, or particularly attention-grabbing way; (b) communicating the vision in consistent behavior, words, and deeds; (c) making all decision making and governance actions build toward the vision; (d) providing activities that require some risk and buy-in to accomplish then rewarding success; (e) making daily actions communicate the hope and dream of the vision; and (f) developing school mottoes, mission statements, or symbols that communicate the vision.

Furthermore, there are some additional actions that schools can take to articulate and communicate a shared vision: (a) placing the vision statement, printed, and posted in the front hallway; (b) reviewing before school starts every year in a ceremony during which staff sign the vision statement as a form of personal commitment; (c) addressing the vision statement during assemblies, planning meetings, and school

governance council meetings; (d) basing decisions on the vision and values of the school; (e) listing belief statements that people hold for the school; and (e) communicating the school's vision symbolically through mottoes, flags, banners, and materials that are sent out from the school, such as letterheads, pencils, and so forth.

In developing and implementing a vision for a school, a principal must not be “blinded” by their vision. Furthermore, strong visions can be restricting (Fullan, 1992) if they discourage teachers from suggesting alternative approaches to helping students. Schools that develop noninclusive visions, for example, may exclude important groups or values. Teachers and community members should not be forced to adhere to a single, inflexible vision. Transformational leadership involves working with diverse groups to develop a shared conception of what the school should accomplish.

Finally, as I begin to develop a vision, it is important to me to develop the vision and mission of the school collaboratively. As Sergiovanni (1991) suggests (as cited in Peterson, 1995):

One theme emerges from this discussion of the process of change. Though principals are important and their visions key in focusing attention on change and in successfully implementing the process of change, what counts in the end is bringing together the ideas and commitments of a variety of people who have a stake in the success of the school. (p.5)

As this process unfolds, principals can often find themselves on thin ice. They need to be clear about what it is that they want, but cannot be so clear that they are providing people with road maps. They need to allow people to have an important

say in shaping the direction of the school and deciding on the changes needed to get there, but they cannot be so detached that these individual aspirations remain more rhetorical than real. I believe as a leader, I need to concentrate on doing the right thing, not just doing things right.

Putting Concepts into Practice

I have had the unique fortune to be hired as a principal before finishing my administration course work. This experience has been beneficial in many ways, and frustrating in others. The positive factors come from being in the job and experiencing first hand many of the situations discussed in class. Having first hand knowledge and experience has been helpful in learning and understanding various leadership concepts. The frustrations have come from the lack of experience and forethought allowed before dealing with critical daily issues. I have had to learn some things from the school of hard knocks. However, I would not trade the actual experience of the principalship for anything. I believe the virtual experience is much better than role playing or just talking about it.

Therefore, the essential question raised in this section is, "Now that I'm in a leadership position, what can I do to improve teaching and learning?" There are no definitive answers to this question or simple prescriptions that will work in every situation, however, one must have and implement a plan. Through my experiences with the administration course work and the principalship, I have come to several decisions of how I would play out my beliefs and implement them into action. As I have stated earlier, the three most important aspects of leadership are: (a) impeccable character; (b) workable knowledge of how to lead; and (c) having a collaborative vision that sets the tone for everyone.

One of the most challenging aspects to life for everyone has been the development of character. It seems everyone has a different definition or level of accountability. As for myself, I expect a high quality of moral and professional character. In addition, I expect the same quality of character while the staff is at work. How does one implement this tone? For example, I don't tell jokes that I wouldn't tell my kids. If another is saying something of low character, I will leave. I also set up situations for the staff and students to be rewarded for exemplary behavior. Furthermore, during meetings we will review some of the principles learned from Lebow's book A Journey into the Heroic Environment. I believe the environment of a school directly reflects the leader. So, it is my desire to be a leader of character at all times so it will allow me to focus on the leadership skills I need to implement daily.

I will use multiple leadership strategies to gain the most effective educational outcomes. It is important to create a visible presence in day-to-day activities, and I will model behaviors consistent with the school's vision. In addition, I will organize resources to accomplish building and district goals; informally drop in on classrooms; make staff development activities a priority; and most of all, I will help people do the right things and reinforce those activities. Furthermore, I will strive to communicate clearly the reasons for decisions I have made whenever possible; discipline staff and students in a fair, firm, and consistent manner; and respect confidentiality. Likewise, I will implement changes slowly; establish a principal's advisory committee made up of grade level teachers; and keep current with changes and new programs. Finally, I will seek out a mentor who

understands my life and can be a sounding board to my ideas. And most importantly, I will be thoughtful to the people with who I work.

As I implement my leadership vision, I will become the keeper of the rules; the protector of broken hearts and disappointed dreams; the provider of unyielding encouragement and relentless motivator to help kids so they can reach beyond themselves; and the helper of people to develop friendships and respect for others, and to become responsible citizens. Most of all, I hope I will become the kind of role model which touches lives and helps lead them in a wonderful direction in life.

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