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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

Through the words and actions of my first teachers, my parents, I have come to know that I am unconditionally loved and valued. This understanding has led to a belief in self, the capability to take risks, and the capacity to look beyond self to meet the needs of others. Extended family reinforced the same message, and my grandmother in particular played a vital role in my development. As a child with many brothers and sisters and even more cousins I treasured time alone with my grandmother. I loved long afternoons in the sewing room playing on a cool linoleum floor while she worked. We spent time together in the kitchen and the garden as well. I can often recall her singing as she managed the multiple roles in her life; grandmother, wife, mother, sister, aunt, and friend. Although her days were demanding, it was not difficult to understand the joy she found in her work, nor was it difficult to see the joy she brought to others by sharing her talents. I loved all the clothes she made for my cousins and me, and her cooking was exquisite. Nothing tasted better than lunch at Grandma's! As a special treat the older grandchildren were given access to her jewelry box. It was filled with glittering earrings and brightly colored brooches nestled among strands of pearls and shiny black beads, a portal to fantastic adventures limited only by our imagination. As an adult I now understand that these childhood experiences were a priceless gift. My grandmother clearly played a significant role in my development and continues to be a major influence in my life.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Vicki M. Sullivan

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Introduction

Through the words and actions of my first teachers, my parents, I have come to know that I am unconditionally loved and valued. This understanding has led to a belief in self, the capability to take risks, and the capacity to look beyond self to meet the needs of others. Extended family reinforced the same message, and my grandmother in particular played a vital role in my development. As a child with many brothers and sisters and even more cousins I treasured time alone with my grandmother. I loved long afternoons in the sewing room playing on a cool linoleum floor while she worked. We spent time together in the kitchen and the garden as well. I can often recall her singing as she managed the multiple roles in her life; grandmother, wife, mother, sister, aunt, and friend. Although her days were demanding, it was not difficult to understand the joy she found in her work, nor was it difficult to see the joy she brought to others by sharing her talents. I loved all the clothes she made for my cousins and me, and her cooking was exquisite. Nothing tasted better than lunch at Grandma's! As a special treat the older grandchildren were given access to her jewelry box. It was filled with glittering earrings and brightly colored brooches nestled among strands of pearls and shiny black beads, a portal to fantastic adventures limited only by our imagination. As an adult I now understand that these childhood experiences were a priceless gift. My grandmother clearly played a significant role in my development and continues to be a major influence in my life.

In all of the time that I have known her during the past forty plus years, she has remained a haven. Being with her today evokes the same response she inspired in me as a child. The clarity of her philosophy for life remains unchanged. In fact, time has strengthened and

reinforced her identify. As a result of being a witness to her life it seems inevitable that much of her way of living has become mine.

The manifestation of my grandmother's actions can be best characterized as servant leadership. The cooking, the cleaning, the sewing, and the tending of her large extended family were a source of great joy. She found meaning in her life by being a model of service and by using her talents to encourage others to find their own passion. According to Nelson Mandela the empowerment of those within the community exists as the standard for success. Like my grandmother, he exhorts leaders and followers alike to commit to making a contribution for the common good, and he challenges each of us to recognize and use our gifts so that others may do the same. Prospective principals like myself would do well to carry this attitude into our jobs. Consider Mandela's words as he captures a vision of successful leadership eloquently.

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of the universe. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory that is within us. It's not just in some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others (Farrell, 2001, p. 10).

What are the beliefs, values, and practices, which can bring a vision of servant leadership to fruition? The role of today's principal requires leadership in multiple domains; vision, collaboration, politics, organization, instruction, and ethics. I am particularly grateful to the work of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) who articulated these leadership domains in their 1996 document the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders (Council of

Chief State School Officers). The consortium, established in 1994, was comprised of thirty-two education agencies and thirteen education administrative associations. The goal of the group was to raise expectations for school leaders to enter and remain in educational administration. Currently, thirty-five states are using the six ISLLC Standards to assist in education reform.

I believe it is a positive step to have created a common set of core expectations for effective leaders for a number of reasons. The standards create clear targets for new administrators like me to build and nurture a philosophy. It is a benchmark that I can use to measure myself to assess strengths as well as areas that require growth. They also serve as a call to veteran administrators that leadership is a necessary part of educational reform. Additionally, the standards can be used to give experienced principals an understanding of professional development that should be pursued for themselves. In light of the recently re-authorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) which includes among other things, provisions for more rigorous teacher evaluation and licensure programs, it is timely. Iowa's adoption of the ISLLC standards, known as the Iowa Standards for School Leadership (ISSL), is a good faith effort that shows a willingness on the part of Iowa's principals to demonstrate increase proficiency in a time when we are asking more of our teachers in terms of performance. I believe the ISLLC and ISSL Standards will also provide administrators with a reference point as we embark on navigating the ESEA legislation. ESEA has the potential to confront administrators with its challenging expectations for increased student performance. In contrast, the standards offer a document that can be used to guide school improvement through the improvement of school leadership. An analogy for the use of the standards is that of a compass being useful in keeping oneself on course during a storm. Most importantly the document

represents a public record of our profound commitment on behalf of administrators to meeting the educational needs of children in this country.

Despite the focus point that the ISLLC and ISSL Standards provide I find some modification necessary to make them my own. My editing allows me to account for the background I bring to the profession. A synthesis of the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, and skills found in each of these domains comprises the essence of the principalship for me which is to establish the following: clarity of mission, stewardship of a vision borne out of collaboration, an ability to innovate, measurable results, tenacity as a core value, and expertise in harvesting maximum benefits from financial and human resources.

Visionary Leadership

Effective principals are rooted in a clearly defined vision of learning that inspires a sense of purpose. It provides direction for all the stakeholders. The importance of being cognizant of that reality and humbled by its implications must not be underestimated. Developing, articulating, implementing and nurturing the vision are of equal importance for it is critical that principals recognize the awesome strength and resiliency in an organization with a common goal.

In a book entitled, *The Most Effective Organization in the U.S.: Leadership Secrets of The Salvation Army*, authors Ben Brown and Robert A. Watson (2001) offer nine strategies for replicating The Salvation Army's success. They suggest that focusing energy and attention in these areas will lead to positive results. The nine strategies are: Engage the spirit, put people in your purpose, embody the brand, lead by listening, spread responsibility, share the profits, organize to improvise, act with audacity, and make joy count (Brown & Watson). Kouzes and Posner's (1995) research also supports the importance of vision in effective leaders. Being

perceived as honest, forward-looking, inspirational, and competent were the top four qualities stakeholders expect. Kouzes and Posner define leadership as “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations” (p. 30). Sagor (2000) in *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research* articulates a strong vision as a “vivid portrait of an outcome in enough detail so that anyone who reads it or hears it can close his or her eyes and see precisely the same thing” (p. 166). It seems that another element of true vision is that it is also a shared vision. Including constituents in the formation of the vision is an essential strategy in establishing a vision that is owned by everyone who will be influenced by it. Certainly, as a visionary leader, I plan to do these things and ultimately create a culture that is filled with people who are excited to contribute their individual pieces in order to bring a collective dream to life. One of my most important jobs as principal will be to embody that vision so stakeholders have a focus point that allows them to fully participate in the journey. Keeping the vision in front of stakeholders results in a culture that reflects a sense of purpose and ownership among its members and evidences a strong commitment to meeting the needs of diverse learners. I believe that the people closest to the students in a school will need to be included in the development of a vision statement. Parents, teachers, and other community members will need the opportunity to speak and to listen to other stakeholders as the first step in creating and sustaining an organization that truly values lifelong learning and continuous improvement. It is likely that my first principalship will be in an existing school so it seems imperative at the outset that all parties involved take time to reflect on our individual beliefs about the purpose of school. Then we can collectively fashion a vision statement that acknowledges the common elements and creates one voice from many. Sagor (1996) writes about a process that I could use for initiating the creation of a school

vision in his book, *Local Control and Accountability: How to Get It, Keep It, and Improve School Performance*. He describes a reflective writing prompt,

Imagine it is five years from now. Our school has been successful beyond our highest expectations. It is the last week of May, and we are witnessing a student going through a significant "rite of passage," the school's exit exhibition. This is a 20-minute oral presentation given before a panel of at least six adults. The student's assignment is to

- Describe/demonstrate the skills or knowledge that he or she has developed as a consequence of the educational experience at our school.
- Explain/demonstrate how those skills or knowledge were acquired.

In as much detail as possible and using as many concrete examples as you can, relate what you see the student doing and saying. (p. 20)

Collaborative Leadership

Concurrently, a principal needs to work to foster a culture of collaboration that is responsive to community interests and needs and seeks to take full advantage of the resources available within the community. Collaborative leadership can be recognized in the practice of shared decision-making that is rooted in a vision and in goals that are a result of consensus. Conley's (1991) research is one example that supports the positive outcomes associated with shared-decision making. Unfortunately, three types of typical school cultures exist as barriers to a collaborative organization. An effective principal must be aware of each of these cultures and be prepared to work to replace them. Fieman-Nemser and Floden (1986) identified one such culture. It is characterized by equality (equal is valued over equitable), autonomy, and isolation. In this setting teachers operate separately from one another, and the community is kept at arm's length. Teachers' conversations in the halls as well as in staff meetings are void of any references to their own practice. Scholarly inquiry on the part of the staff would not be expected. Any reform efforts would come from the outside. Change in teacher practice would be rare. A second feature often found in typical school cultures that presents another potential roadblock is

the practicality ethic (Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2001). Teachers commonly work in conditions where they are inundated with new problems that need to be addressed. However, there is insufficient time to challenge existing structures and processes in order to address the root causes of the issues. As a result the chance of influencing any substantial change remains low. People are simply overwhelmed and do as little as possible to get by until the next crisis looms. Argyris and Schon's study (1978) described this as single-loop learning. Leithwood, et al. (2001) proposed the tradition of oral communication as being the third factor that blocks significant change in schools. One advantage of making time to record and reflect on experiences in a written format is that it amplifies the opportunity for both individuals and groups to learn. Writing creates an opportunity to think deeply and therefore learn deeply. Leithwood et al. referred to this as double-loop learning. It also allows other stakeholders not directly involved in the experience to participate, however, the authors must be willing to make their work public.

A number of implications for my practice as an administrator exist from these examples. In order to establish and nurture such a culture, collaborative relationships must be supported among all stakeholders. As a leader I hold the key to unlocking the power that lies within the web of relationships. This type of leadership calls for me to be an active listener for many groups. Staff, students, parents, board members, site council members, and community members are all contributors to the success of a building. A situational leadership model such as Hersey and Blanchard's (1977, 1982) is a good fit for me. In employing this model I will adjust the amount and type of support and direction provided to match the maturity of the individual or the group. As a truly collaborative leader I will work toward empowering those within the

organization to function at the most independent level possible. At the same time I must be prepared to reduce the amount of direction given as the maturity level increases.

School business partnerships are just one example of a collaborative structure I intend to implement as a principal. According to the U.S. Department of Education there are currently over 200,000 such partnerships in operation across our country. These dynamic relationships are perfect avenues for meeting the needs of students and community businesses and building a culture that encourages and supports collaboration as a means to improve student learning.

Nonetheless, a team approach is not an easy task according to Hoerr's work (1996). A principal who is serious about genuine collaboration must be willing to allow more time for it, work to redefine roles, and work to support a shift in accountability since everyone participates in choosing, implementing, and monitoring solutions.

Political Leadership & Collaborative Leadership

A strong political leader "understands, responds to, and influences the context in which a school is operating" (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002). At any given point in time, educational leaders deal with global, national, state, and local influences. Several recent examples come to mind.

Schools around the world have been dealing with the effects of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Our children are being educated in a time where the threat of a new and different kind of enemy is very real. In response, school communities are questioning the relevance of the curriculum. Lew Smith (2001), associate professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Education, the Director of the Fordham Center for Educational Research and Leadership, and the Director of the National Principals Leadership Institute,

maintains that we should use this tragedy as an opportunity to examine the role and purpose of schools. I agree with his position that schools should be places of high expectations and academic rigor, while at the same time being centers of caring. "Schools need to convey this message: 'We care about you, and we care about each other,' says Smith" (2001, p. 44). I plan to begin to build a school that is known for its nurturing and caring atmosphere from day one of my principalship. It will be too late to do so if I wait for a catastrophe to begin to send a message of compassion and concern.

Another example of political influence in the United States is the recent reauthorization, January 2001, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA, also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, has tremendous implications for public schools in this country that we are only just beginning to experience. According to Reeves (2001) in *Crusade in the classroom: How George W. Bush's education reforms will affect your children; our schools*, the Bush plan and the state certification plans it support will have a major impact on teachers and administrators in three areas. First, the focus on student achievement will be unprecedented. Second, alternate certification paths toward licensure will be implemented for those willing to teach or administrate. Third, compensation for teachers and administrators will be linked to student success and a willingness to work in the most needy schools. At the present time in Iowa, the Department of Education is working diligently to interpret the new accountability guidelines and the ensuing repercussions should schools fail to demonstrate adequate progress for virtually all of its students. In theory, I can support the concept of leaving no child behind. In practice, however, I am extremely concerned about the actual effects NCLB will have on students and educators. As a change coach in the building where I currently teach

and an aspiring administrator, I struggle to make sense of what appears to be the very real possibility of public humiliation for schools that fail to meet impossible achievement goals. My task will be to share accurate information with staff and school families regarding this legislation as I strive to develop a balanced vision for a successful school. One practice that can help to insulate my building from the more troublesome effects of ESEA is to plan to celebrate the successes in my building regardless of whether they meet the federal government's standards.

Although I have enumerated only a few examples, it is a fact of life that principals will continue to face multiple political contexts that are constantly changing and evolving. Accepting current reality is part of a strong principal's strategy for success. Additionally, I need to become involved in those multiple contexts by acting as an advocate for students. A political leader understands that schools have little or no control over many of the external environments that impact schools. However, a leader also recognizes and exerts considerable control over internal environments (Leithwood et al.). Several strategies that mitigate the negative influence of internal contexts include implementation of timelines. Timelines can help to introduce forthcoming change. Development of a school mission and goals that resulting from consensus among all constituents is another healthy way to deal with shifting contexts (Rosenholtz, 1989). Additionally, if I recognize and support collaborative leadership it is likely that individuals and groups will wish to participate in the process of working through the implications of the varied contexts. As a result many suggestions or requests will be brought to my attention. Viewed from a single perspective each request or idea may seem entirely reasonable. My task as principal is to continue to gain skill and expertise in the art of examining issues in multiple contexts and against the backdrop of the school's vision. At the same time collaborative leaders

can facilitate others to recognize and even value others' points of view. True collaboration yields innovative solutions that are a synthesis of many perspectives. I must work to encourage other stakeholders to buy-in; parents, district staff, support agency staff, as well as local and state policy makers. Emily Calhoun, in an interview with Dennis Sparks, (1999) says principals are, "the critical mass." She charges principals with the responsibility to become fully engaged with the process and to move it forward. I count on being "the critical mass," and I accept full responsibility for it.

Organizational and Instructional Leadership

Organizational and instructional leadership are also necessary to provide a setting for building a community that is committed to working together to realize a shared vision. It may be useful to think of these forms of leadership in the framework developed by Achilles and his colleagues that appeared in their article, *The Political World of the Principal: How Principals Get Things Done* (1999).

We believe that it is more useful to consider school administration as composed of leadership as well as management functions, with leadership conceptualized as the risk-taking force leading to new forms of schooling and management as the conservative force maintaining what has proven effective in the existing school culture. (p. 25)

The Education Commission of the States (1996) found that a school organized around a fundamental belief in high expectations and a respect for the diversity in talents and learning styles of those within the community has the greatest chance of success for education children well. A school's direction needs to be based upon a long-range plan that reflects significant input from stakeholders. Goals must be databased, instructional in nature, and include clearly defined success criteria for measuring growth both in the long term and the short term. A

philosophy of continuous progress sends an important message that the work of a school is never finished. Celebrating success along the way is important, but the working and learning never stops. Allocation of resources will clearly demonstrate dedication to making decisions that reflect an intent to meet the needs of all students. Teachers who work with students on a regular basis are recognized as a precious resource in terms of what they know about students' needs as well as being the people who can impact a student's achievement in a significant way.

Consequently, staff development based on analysis of external and internal data, is a budget item priority. Problem solving, oriented to systems and processes rather than people, is embedded in the culture. Problems are viewed as opportunities to learn and grow since they push participants to further collaboration and to the creation of innovative strategies. Over time successful innovations are absorbed into the culture of the organization as staff gain skill and expertise in a particular area. Resources that were being utilized to develop the solution are now freed up and cycle begins again. Boston Superintendent Thomas Payzant's employs a change model in his district (Guiney, 2001). It is composed of two basic actions that summarize effective principal's practice: Focus on instruction and on professional development to improve instruction, and place an unwavering emphasis on helping teachers work together, make their work public, and end teacher isolation. In the process, teacher leadership emerges. A principal can facilitate this by modeling a steady commitment. Every decision must be based on serious consideration of the impact it will have. Every verbal and written communication must convey this theme. Equally important is the manner in which novice and experienced teachers are evaluated. As principal I must be prepared with resources to help new teachers assimilate the philosophy and corresponding practices in a building. The climate of the building needs to welcome new people,

acknowledge the gifts and strengths they have while assuring them that needed support will be ongoing and personalized to meet their specific needs. Experienced teachers must be recognized as such. These teachers are a wealth of information! I plan to use them as a resource to honor their wisdom. As a servant leader I need to seek out teachers' needs to support them in improving their practice by providing timely professional development. I concur with Peter Temes (2001) who argues that those in leadership positions should focus their energy on meeting the individual needs of the teachers. Temes states, "Good schools help, great schools help more; but great teachers are the far more precious commodity." (p. 36) Temes challenges us to see that although reform at a broader level matters it is the experience of each student that really counts, and it is individual teachers that so greatly impact students' lives. Hall and Hord (2001) offer a Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) for understanding and facilitating change in educational settings. They advocate that leaders seek to meet teachers needs on an individual basis if true and lasting reform is to take place.

Knowing how and where to start is a potential stumbling block. Fortunately, I found the tools for implementing change in the work of Hall and Hord (2001) to be especially helpful. The CBAM provides three diagnostic dimensions for principals as well as other change agents to use in order to ensure the success of the school improvement effort: Innovation Configurations, Levels of Use, and Stages of Concern. Innovation Configurations involve a written articulation of what the change will look like in varying degrees of fidelity to the original design. The Levels of Use dimension provides feedback on behaviors and how people are acting with respect to a specific change. Stages of Concern allow us to track the developmental pattern of how feelings and perceptions evolve as a change unfolds. The combined use of all three diagnostic tools

provides highly personalized and specific information that can be used to design differentiated interventions for individuals or groups of teachers. I am attracted to the Hall and Hord's model because it charges leadership with the responsibility for meeting teachers' needs before, during, and after the change process. This model reflects the servant leadership style that I live.

Ethical Leadership

Unquestionably, having a passion for the work, believing in people, and giving others an opportunity to be a part of the vision is what inspires outstanding dedication and support from staff, students, parents, and other community members. Yet a principal lacking in integrity, fairness, and strong character will not be able to provide ethical leadership which is the final requisite. An ethical principal's character reflects a strong sense of altruism and a willingness to persevere in order to do what is right and just. Ethical practice requires a leader to examine all the aspects of a complex issue and then develop a plan for addressing it. There are no excuses for not using the cognitive and financial resources available to bring equity and social justice to a situation.

I anticipate that time is a peripheral issue that I will need to address as it bears the potential to influence my ability to make ethical decisions. Despite the fact that we live in a culture fascinated with instant results, we know that lasting and significant change happens over an extended period of time as a result of innovative thinking, a willingness to take risks, and careful monitoring of results. In fact, Hall and Hord (2001) found that major change in a school takes a minimum of three to five years. As an ethical leader I must find the courage to base my decisions on carefully researched thinking and not give into the pressure created by our media culture.

On a related note the influence that media has over American youth is a current example of an issue that requires ethical leadership. Elementary-age children in particular are a targeted audience of advertisers seeking to create brand loyalty for their products (The National Institute on Media and the Family). Online marketers will only continue to intensify their focus on children and teens as more youth gain Internet access. The glut of commercial sites on the Internet that target youth is an ugly testimony to the willingness of others to exploit children for personal gain.

The overrepresentation of minorities and males in our special education population is another example that requires ethical leadership of a principal. The problem is clearly seen in research (National Center for Learning Disabilities). They found that for youth ages 6-21 during the 1998-1999 school year black and American Indian students were over-represented in special education. As a leader my responsibility is to know the law and its implications for my students and to be prepared to respond in sensitive ways.

Finally, I believe I hold the responsibility to develop ethical attitudes and practices not only in myself but in my staff and students as well. Part of my platform as an administrator includes developing emotional intelligence and creating cooperative classroom structures as a way to accomplish this task (Aronson, 2000). Does this conflict with ESEA's emphasis on student achievement? In the book, *Nobody Left to Hate: Teaching Compassion After Columbine* the author, Elliot Aronson, contends that the exact opposite is true, "Other studies have also demonstrated that emotional intelligence (EQ) and academic intelligence (IQ) are separate qualities, and that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of success in school." (p. 102).

Conclusion

I realize that I have been extremely fortunate to have spent a lifetime being mentored by a number of individuals who have modeled an altruistic lifestyle that was simultaneously challenging and deeply rewarding for them. At first it was family, then friends and colleagues entered my world. They have been steadfast in their support and unwavering in their encouragement. As a result, I am compelled to continue to pass on what many have shared with me.

Nothing short of tenacity is demanded if the vision is to survive, if student learning is to continue to improve, and if an increasingly diverse population of stakeholders is to continue to collaborate. Schools are highly complex organizations that rely heavily on its leadership. If a principal is to build a thriving learning community, it is fundamental to embody gratitude, joy, altruism and perseverance. Conceivably, there is a simpler way to articulate this personal professional vision. Mandela would exhort his audience to choose a path and then embark. The primary task being to see through the fear, doubt, and criticism and to let one's own light shine.

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