A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: a reflective essay

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As I began reflecting on education and leadership in the school setting, I realized that I have been involved in formal education in one form or another for the past forty-three years. I began kindergarten in a one-room rural school, with one instructor for nine grades. The teacher picked me up and transported me to school each day. I'm not sure what role the principal had in that school at that time. I don't actually remember a principal. The next year I began first grade in a Catholic school in a small town, and I continued in this school through grade twelve. It was in junior high that I began thinking about becoming a teacher, and in high school that I decided on a career in the education profession. Many wonderful, caring teachers and principals along the way helped to influence my decision to become an elementary school teacher.
A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
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Constance L. Weber
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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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As I began reflecting on education and leadership in the school setting, I realized that I have been involved in formal education in one form or another for the past forty-three years. I began kindergarten in a one-room rural school, with one instructor for nine grades. The teacher picked me up and transported me to school each day. I'm not sure what role the principal had in that school at that time. I don't actually remember a principal. The next year I began first grade in a Catholic school in a small town, and I continued in this school through grade twelve. It was in junior high that I began thinking about becoming a teacher, and in high school that I decided on a career in the education profession. Many wonderful, caring teachers and principals along the way helped to influence my decision to become an elementary school teacher.

After high school, I attended college for four years and earned my teaching degree. I then went on to teach in a Catholic elementary school. I have taught for twenty-six years, working under a total of nine different principals, each with his/her own unique style of leadership. Some of the areas of emphasis by different principals were curriculum, public
relations, communication, environment, discipline, goals and objectives, assessments, and shared decision making. All are important. How does one principal deal with all areas? Can one person be an expert on everything? I think it is a challenge to fit everything in, as well as completing all the necessary paper work that accompanies the job.

Five years ago I began to consider the possibility of becoming a leader in a school in the form of a principal. Four years ago I began the masters program at the University of Northern Iowa, and I have learned a lot from the many classes and instructors along the way. The experiences and memories of teachers and principals I have had over the past forty-three years, both as a student and as a teacher, are varied and many. Probably the teachers and principals I remember most fondly are the ones who didn’t settle for less than a person’s best, the ones who were committed to the education profession, the ones who were fair, honest, and friendly to everyone, and the ones who displayed a sense of humor. Over the years as a teacher, I have tried to display those characteristics to the students in my classroom, and I hope as a principal in a school that I could do the same. In this paper I will reflect on three
major areas that I consider important for leadership in today’s schools. They are public relations, site-based management, and communication skills. Though I will address each of them separately, as you will see in this paper, there is much overlap when it comes to implementation. There are many other topics for reflection, but these are the areas on which I have chosen to concentrate.

Public Relations

Public relations is both an art and a science. It is the art of enabling people to understand an organization, such as a school, and to stimulate their support of its mission. It is the science of choosing the appropriate media, formats, and events to connect effectively with audiences or publics with which the school wishes to establish goodwill (Campbell, 1987).

Over my twenty-six year teaching career, I have learned that public relations is of major importance if a school is to survive in a community. I have also learned that the principal plays a very important role in promoting the public relations of a school. One particular principal, who took the leadership role when enrollment was at an all-time low, approximately
eleven years ago, placed an emphasis on public relations and on positive school and community relations. This principal, though she did not live within the school district, was visible, attending many school as well as community functions. She made students and parents feel good about school and about learning. For the next three years, enrollment increased under this principal. Then, a new principal was hired for the following school year. This principal also chose not to move to the community. With the new principal, the emphasis shifted away from public relations and positive school and community relations. This principal spent very little time in the community. She worked from 7:30 until 4:00 and went home. Her last day of school was the same as the last day of students and staff. Parents were made to feel that they were not welcome in the school building. One letter that went home to parents told them to wait outside the building when dropping their children off or picking them up. The very clear message given to parents from the principal was that the inside of the school building was off-limits to them. They were not welcome in the school building where their children attend! This upset a lot of parents. What a very poor message
to send to parents! Parents are the most frequent visitors to the school. Principals should take advantage of all opportunities to meet and talk with parents and to make them feel welcome (Hines, 1993). Principals, as well as teachers, should keep a door open to parents at all times. If parents are not made to feel welcome in a school, it is very possible that they will not want their children to be a part of that school. They may wonder if their children would also be made to feel unwelcome. This year a new principal was hired and the emphasis has again shifted. Public relations and positive school and community relations are again important. Parents are welcomed into the building with open arms. This new principal is very visible and active in the school and the community at large. He is willing to make the effort to put in extra time and energy.

In developing an effective public relations program, it is important for the principal to enlist the support of several groups of people: teachers, students, support staff, parents, and the community at large. How does a principal win over each of these groups? Here are a few examples. The principal could offer an unplanned break to a teacher by taking over
his/her class for twenty minutes. This can do wonders for a teacher's morale. Children feel good about coming to school when the principal greets them by name. The principal could be waiting at the door occasionally. This, in fact, happens this year. The current principal knows all students' names and interacts with them both formally and informally on a daily basis. Support staff appreciate the principal being available to them. He sits down and has a cup of coffee with them.

Principals can let parents know that they are always welcome at school. One way of doing this is to invite them for lunch with their children. Many parents have had lunch at school this year. Children love it! Community members could be invited for a brown bag lunch to listen to student musicians perform at lunchtime. Remembering that the word principal begins with PR is an easy way for the principal to stay focused on his/her public relations responsibility to the various publics to which he/she comes in contact (Hines, 1993). The present principal does indeed take the public relations responsibility very seriously.

I believe that public relations is very important. It cannot be overemphasized. It also cannot be done in
isolation. It is not just the responsibility of the principal. The entire staff needs to work with the principal to develop a quality program.

Site-Based Management

Having taught in a Catholic school for the past twenty-six years, the idea of site-based management is a familiar one. Many Catholic schools are in a location far from the Office of the Superintendent. Many decisions are made on a local level. Is that site-based management? Maybe.

What is site-based management? Site-based management is "basically an attempt to transform schools into communities where the appropriate people participate constructively in major decisions that affect them" (David, 1995, 1996, p.4). The guiding premise of school-based decision making is that administrators, teachers, and parents are the ones who best understand the contexts and cultures of the school, and so we must build their capacity to be jointly responsible for student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Site-based management is a way of thinking about governance and about how people in a school and a community work together to provide the best education possible for the youth of our
country. Everyone in the school and the community must work together.

Site-based management has almost as many variants as there are places claiming to use the term (David, 1995, 1996). Differences exist on every important dimension - who initiates it, who is involved in the process, what they control, and whether or not they are accountable to an outside authority. Site-based management may be instituted by state law or by administrative action, by a district, or by a school. Most variants of site-based management involve some sort of representative decision-making council at the school. These councils might share authority with the principal, or they may be merely advisory in nature. Some councils have the authority to hire principals, some hire and fire, and some do neither. The principal is the chair of some councils, while others specify that the principal not be the chair. Site councils also vary widely in their composition. In addition to parents, teachers, and the principal, they might include community members, business representatives, students, and classified staff. Kentucky requires every school to have a site-based council consisting of three teachers, two parents, and the
principal; while Chicago requires eleven members, including six parents, two community members, two teachers, and the principal (Drury, 1993). Maryland and Texas do not specify the composition of their school-site councils (David, 1995, 1996). Educators may outnumber non-educators on the councils, or vice versa, and the list of differences goes on and on.

Why should schools operate under site-based management? Many reasons exist for initiating site-based management, "yet virtually all are cloaked in the language of increasing student achievement" (David, 1995, 1996, p.5).

Site-based management appears to have an advantage over traditional management because it involves shared decision making and participation. The principal acts as an overseer of the educational process, applying certain skills to achieve the goals of the school. The most useful skills that need to be applied are planning, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling (Michel, 1991).

Leadership is a crucial ingredient in the whole process of site-based management. The kind of leader present in a school can help determine the success or failure of the
program. What is the role of the principal in site-based management? The principal is one of the key components in the successful implementation of site-based management. The success probably depends more on the principal than on anyone else (Frohreich, 1995). If the principal does not believe in the process, then it probably will not become a reality. The principal has to be willing to share some decision-making with others.

Let us go back to the past and take a look at a legendary hero of the Greeks, Odysseus, and use him as an example of how not to lead (McKenzie, 1992). Odysseus was considered to be a great heroic charismatic leader in Greek literature, but in looking at his leadership style, he would fail miserably in a site-based management style of leadership. Odysseus issued only orders and edicts to the troops he was in charge of commanding. He rarely took time to assess the dangers he and his men were about to encounter, and he almost never consulted the members of his team. There were very few problem-solving strategies employed by Odysseus and his troops. The encounter with the Cyclops is a fairly typical example of how Odysseus led his men in and out of dangerous
situations. Even after receiving warnings from his men and seeing signs of danger all around him, Odysseus ordered his men to wait in the Cyclops' cave, expecting that they would be treated with hospitality. Of course, several warriors end up being killed and devoured by the giant before the remaining troops are able to escape. The terrible situation isn't over. Even after Odysseus and his troops are back on board their vessel, Odysseus begins taunting the Cyclops from the rear of the boat, even though his men are begging him to remain silent. This taunting, of course, does not please the giant, as he then demands from his father, Poseidon, that a curse be put on Odysseus and his men which would prevent Odysseus and his men from ever returning to their homeland. Odysseus was willing to sacrifice his men for the sake of his own ruthless cause.

The Cyclops story holds a very powerful lesson for school executives operating under site-based management. In this example, Odysseus represents the boss in a hierarchical organization - "the kind of leader we can no longer afford if education is to respond to a changing world" (McKenzie, 1992, p.23). This kind of heroic, top-down leadership will not fare
well in schools today. Schools today require a leadership style that is collaborative and collegial. Leaders in today’s schools of site-based management need “to learn to let go and provide the means for people to solve their own problems” (Bergman, 1992, p.48).

According to McKenzie (1992), the principal in site-based management would do well to heed and nurture the good ideas of his/her team. Many good ideas are probable when team planning is a reality. McKenzie further adds the following advice for principals. The principal should be continually monitoring the environment. He/she should know what is going on in the community and should be actively involved in activities of the community. The principal should attend church dinners and other social events. By being visible, the principal will stay in tune with any changes that may affect the school. The principal also needs to keep intellectually in tune with new developments and trends in education. Computers now make it easy to scan thousands of education stories each month by conducting on-line data base searches in ERIC. Principals also need to be flexible and alert, picking up on any cues from people or the environment which
may affect the school community. They need to listen and learn from those who are close to the daily operations of the school, adjusting direction as conditions warrant. Principals need to seek wise council in arranging for group training in active and reflective listening. Working in groups does not always come naturally to people, so they may need some training in order to work in collegial planning groups. One very prudent piece of advice for principals is to remain responsible. Don’t give away the school. Someone must remain responsible for the well-being and welfare of the children. Someone must make difficult, confidential, and often troubling decisions about staff performance. Someone must lead the school forward into new territory. This someone is most likely to be the principal.

In addition to this advice, Odden, Wohlstetter, and Olden (1995), offer the following. Principals need to move out of a direct leadership role in some activities and develop strategies for others to make decisions. In site-based management, the days of one-person decision-making are over. Principals need to involve teachers in the recruitment, selection, development, and evaluation of all school staff. They need to become
brokers of information, professional knowledge, and programs that could help teachers accomplish school goals. They should help find professional development and training opportunities for the entire staff. Principals need to become entrepreneurs for additional resources. They need to help create school vision. Principals should foster a culture that supports shared decision making and collegial approaches to school actions. The principal also needs to be a liaison between the school and the school's "customers", including parents, community members, the central office, and the school board. Principals have an awesome job ahead of them in site-based management. It is not an easy task, but it can be a very rewarding one.

A strategy employed by one superintendent to assure that others were included in decision making was the inclusion of just two words inside his office door and on each page of his daily planner. Those two words were "Who else." That strategy has provided him with a "constant reminder to consider who else should be involved, who else would be affected, who else had expertise, and who else's support would be needed to ensure success" (Holcomb, 1993, p.18).
Principals would also be able to successfully employ this strategy in decision making.

Site-based management is one of the many education band wagons which has rushed through our schools in recent years. The challenge for all is to establish lasting and beneficial school improvements because of carefully implemented collaborative decision making. It does not operate under a fixed set of rules. It operates differently from one district to the next, one school to the next, and one year to the next. It is an on-going process with a clearly defined mission charting its course that will continually change as needs dictate, but will always focus on the fundamental needs of each child in the program.

Communication Skills

The final area that I would like to spend time on is communication. Without effective communication, public relations and site-based management will not be possible. The four basic types of communication are reading, writing, speaking, and listening. We all spend many hours each day in some form of communication. Covey (1990) believes that communication is the most important skill we have in life.
The ability to do it well is critical to effectiveness. From my observations over the past twenty-six years, it is very evident that a principal spends a large percentage of each day on communication in one form or another, whether it be talking to a student or staff member, listening to a concern from a parent or community member, talking with a salesperson on the telephone, composing a newsletter to be sent home, reading an article on brain-based education, or dealing with a behavior problem. The list could go on and on.

What skills are essential for effective communication? Covey (1990) recommends, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” (p. 237). To interact effectively with anyone, you must first understand where the person is “coming from.” Covey believes that human beings have a need to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, and to be appreciated. This is psychological survival. When you listen carefully to another person, you give that person “psychological air.” Once you have met that vital need, you can then focus on problem-solving or influencing that person.

Covey believes that most of us have spent years learning to read, write, and speak, but that very few people have had
any education in listening so that they really understand another human being. "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply" (Covey, 1990, p.239). Speaking from my own experience, I have not had training in listening to really understand someone else. As I listen, I am often preparing what to say in response. Perhaps there should be a course for all people in listening with the intent to really understand the other person. This could be very beneficial for a principal as he/she communicates on a daily basis. The opposite can also be true. According to a compilation of studies by Osterman (1993), school leaders who focus only on communicating their own ideas become isolated and ineffectual. In my own experience, the principals who took the time to really listen to the ideas of others were the ones who were the most effective. Those that focused only on their own agendas did become ineffective, and the people who suffered in the end were probably the students. Gemmet (1977) believes that listening is an art. To master this art, he advises that a person first develop the attitude of wanting to listen, and then the skills to help express that attitude.
Schools need to establish two-way communication in order to be truly effective and to encourage parental involvement in a child's education. Swap (1993) offers several ways that principals can help build this climate to encourage two-way communication. Principals can create a school policy that supports involvement of parents. They can hire teachers who like working with parents. They can evaluate staff on their successes in working with families, and they can model their own outreach to parents. Principals can share information from research findings. They can try to allocate time and space for communication between parents and teachers. Principals can also do a lot to encourage teachers to involve parents in the education of their children.

Whether communicating with one person or a group of people, nonverbal messages play an important role. Amundson (1993) notes that one study found 93 percent of a message is sent non-verbally, and only 7 percent through what is said. Other communications experts estimate that about 10 percent of our communication is represented by what we say, while another 30 percent is represented by our sounds, and 60 percent by our body language (Covey, 1990). I think it is
amazing to discover how much of a message is sent non-verbally.

School leaders should strive to enhance interpersonal relationships with their colleagues as well as their constituents. Vann (1994) notes that principals can earn respect of the staff by presenting a clear vision of the mission of the school, and then working together with the staff to accomplish the goals and objectives that have been established. This whole process should start before school begins in the fall, and then be reinforced throughout the school year.

One very important aspect of effective school leadership is the use of humor. I believe that laughter is the best medicine, and what better way to get people to laugh than through the use of humor. In a study by Pierson and Bredeson (1993), results suggest that principals use humor for four major purposes. It is used to create and improve the climate of the school. It is often used to relate to teachers the principal’s understanding of the demands and complexities of their professional worklife. Humor is also used to help break down the rigidness of the bureaucratic structures by
humanizing and personalizing interpersonal communications. Finally, humor is sometimes used to deliver sanctions and other necessary unpleasantries. From my own personal experience, the use of humor is a very effective tool for breaking down barriers among people. It helps to ease tensions that may arise. It often makes for a more pleasant environment in which to work. It is a wonderful way to communicate. I have used it often in the classroom over the past twenty-six years.

Conclusion

Public relations, site-based management, and communication skills are all important areas of consideration for a principal or anyone in a leadership position. As I reflect on their importance, I think about how they will impact my position as a principal in an elementary school. It is easy to put ideas on paper. I need to make sure that the ideas that are on paper are put into practice. I need to walk the talk.

Because I have worked with nine different principals during my teaching career, I know that one person in a leadership position cannot be an expert on every subject. It takes the cooperation and expertise of everyone in an
organization to produce a quality program. Everyone in an organization needs to work on public relations, site-based management, and communication skills, not in isolation, but as integral parts of the total program.

Having been in Catholic education for my entire teaching career, I may have an advantage in these three areas. For the most part, the principals, staff, parents, students, and community members have always worked together to ensure a quality educational program. There have been ups and downs, but learning from mistakes have always produced a stronger program in the end.

I think as long as I always remember why we have schools in the first place - for the education of our youth, and as long as everyone works together to provide the best education possible, I will be able to provide leadership in a school. As I mentioned in the story of the Cyclops, schools today need a leadership style that is collaborative and collegial. I need to remember that the principal, the staff, the students, and the community form a team, and we all need to work together for the good of the students.
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