A vision of elementary school leadership: a reflective essay

Julia Lynne Zastrow

University of Northern Iowa

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A vision of elementary school leadership: a reflective essay

Abstract
The smell of coffee and crayons has always warmed my heart. Coming home from kindergarten, I couldn't wait to join my mother and her perennial cup of coffee at our dining room table for a ritual of coloring and catching up. While I labored away with my Crayolas, my mother would ask me about my day at school, and we would talk together about the sound that a cardinal makes, or the color of our oak tree in the front yard. Through these conversations my mother fostered a joy of learning and sharing that would grow with me into adulthood, and set me on the path toward educational leadership that I am pursuing today.
A VISION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

A Reflective Research Paper

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By

Julie Zastrow

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Dave Else

2-25-04
Date
Advisors/Director of Research Paper

Dianna Engelbrecht

3-1-04
Date
Second Reader of Research Paper

W. P. Callahan

3-5-04
Date Received
Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
The smell of coffee and crayons has always warmed my heart. Coming home from kindergarten, I couldn't wait to join my mother and her perennial cup of coffee at our dining room table for a ritual of coloring and catching up. While I labored away with my Crayolas, my mother would ask me about my day at school, and we would talk together about the sound that a cardinal makes, or the color of our oak tree in the front yard. Through these conversations my mother fostered a joy of learning and sharing that would grow with me into adulthood, and set me on the path toward educational leadership that I am pursuing today.

The coffee and coloring sessions were only one example of an upbringing in a home that emphasized learning in everyday life. School attendance and school work were mandatory for my older brother and me, but my parents cultivated a supportive atmosphere that kept some of the traditional homework-related disagreements to a minimum. My father is a voracious reader, and the books that were everywhere in my house were supplemented by frequent trips to the library. Our family vacations were filled with museums and informative car rides, and they entertained and encouraged all manner of questions about life and the world. Although money was tight, my parents always placed a high priority on extracurricular activities, which led me to fulfilling experiences in show choir, competitive swimming and even twelve years of dance.
My parents were always supportive of my educational efforts, but they also always pressed me to try things that were new and different, sometimes uncomfortably so. One summer, against my protests, my parents enrolled me in a synchronized swim class, thinking it would be good for me to try a different type of swimming. As a competitive distance swimmer, I had little interest and quite a few doubts about trading my hours in the swim lanes for something seemingly so odd and alien. For several class periods, when the class was dispatched to the pool to practice I would swim to the bottom and simply watch my classmates complete their moves, unsure and uncomfortable with my own inexperience. Eventually, though messy and labored, I tried several of the moves myself, and by the end of the summer I had a decent grasp of the basics and a much greater appreciation for the sport. While I gladly returned to competitive swimming when the school year started, the experience reinforced the value of stepping beyond boundaries to try new things.

My parents weren't the only people who helped shape my early learning experiences. Several teachers in my life helped me to grow leaps and bounds, including dance instructor Cherie Chittenden, high school vocal music teacher Kent Hatteberg, and science teacher Miss Sweet. In each of these three I found traits I have tried to mirror in my own educational leadership opportunities. Goals and expectations were made clear to my classmates and me, and were set high. Instructionally, these teachers taught me to value the content they were teaching.
Each offered leadership opportunities to their classes, allowing me to get a first taste for teaching. Most importantly, each personally made me feel like I could make a difference in the world if I put my mind to it. Their influence empowered me to set high goals and do what I needed to do to reach them.

Professionally, varied experiences have enhanced my love of learning, sharing, and now leadership. As a teacher in the Newton School District in Newton, Iowa, I collaborated with a talented teacher, Jack Crandell, who taught me to know my students inside and out. We discussed learning styles and brain-based teaching approaches, as well as the importance of family involvement and differentiated instruction. Through working with Jack, I learned to teach to the whole child. In direct contrast, I then moved to Connecticut, teaching in the city of West Hartford. Connecticut is a leading national proponent of statewide testing, and I realized both the effects and potentials of teaching to state standards and high accountability. Data collection and analysis became my strongest resource. Upon my return to Iowa, I accepted a position as Learning Strategist for College Community School District in Cedar Rapids. This position has allowed me the opportunity to expand my abilities beyond the classroom to include curricular work, staff development and administrative functions.

My Beliefs

My personal and educational experiences have helped to narrow my educational leadership beliefs to three areas: An educational leader must
(a) promote a community of learning, (b) help build clear vision and purpose among staff and students, and (c) understand and articulate an understanding of best practice instruction.

Promoting a Community of Learning

When I try to picture the school I will lead, I envision an environment filled with daily examples of people learning from each other, sharing what they are learning, and being excited about and participating in what others are learning:

1. a group of students collaborates in the library, sharing ideas with each other and questioning each others’ responses;

2. several teachers analyze data together, regrouping their students guided reading groups, or setting goals for themselves; or

3. a pair of parent volunteers leads a before-school session with a group of students, examining Native American artifacts brought back from a recent school trip.

Roland Barth (2001) writes that a community of learning is “a community whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning,” and one whose most important criteria of membership is that “one be a learner—whether one is called a student, teacher, principal, parent, support staff, or certified staff. Everyone” (p.13).
As an educational leader, I must foster an environment that promotes a community of learning, and all members of the organization must be active learners. To instill the value of lifelong learning in its students, it is imperative for an educational institution to possess and promote this culture of learning.

The faculty's ongoing efforts to continue their education can be an essential part of this environment. In a learning community, teachers and administrators need to clearly demonstrate their own ongoing learning processes, to students, peers and parents. Barth (2001) writes that it is "crucial" for teachers and principals to be the leading learners in our school:

Why is it so crucial that teachers and administrators become the leading learners in their schools? The first reason is the extraordinary power of modeling. 'Do as I do, as well as I say' is a powerful message not lost on youngsters who want to emulate the most important adult role models in their lives. Second, the world is changing. The problem with schools isn't that they are no longer what they once were; the problem is that they are precisely what they once were. (p. 28)

Barth (2001) makes an important point about adult modeling of new ideas. Modeling learning with students, sharing new ideas, and discussing these new ideas makes students aware that everyone learns new things. It becomes an expectation that as one grows, learning continues. Students should be made aware of the importance of ongoing learning from the adults that they are closest to, as they are the ones with the most powerful influence. For example, Cohen (2003) states, "It is simply common sense that when both parents and teachers
value literacy (be it learning to read a book or learning to read ourselves and others) children are more likely to appreciate this mode of learning as well” (p. 23).

Barth’s (2001) second point about the value of ongoing adult learning – that without it educational practices stagnate – is just as important an issue for a healthy environment. As a principal, I will need to guide the creation of a structure in school to support these areas. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) emphasizes that effective principals need to incorporate the following elements for successful adult learning:

- Provide time for reflection as an important part of improving practice.
- Invest in teacher learning
- Connect professional development to school learning goals
- Provide opportunities for teachers to work, plan and think together
- Recognize the need to continually improve principals own professional practices. (p. 42)

The implementation of these elements can take several forms. I would structure the schedule to provide regular common planning time for teachers in each grade level. The National Staff Development Council (2001) recommends, “...at least 25 percent of teachers’ time be devoted to their own learning and collaboration with colleagues” (p. 42). This common time allows teachers to participate in learning community activities that include great benefits to the organization, while providing teachers with an avenue for collegiality. For example, as teachers collectively study student work to identify weaknesses and
plan new ways to teach, they in turn increase professionalism and self-esteem of learning community members as well as increase the quality of insights into student performances. Teachers also may use this shared planning time to develop units, lesson plans and activities, directly increasing the effectiveness of their time by dividing the labor while increasing the quantity of ideas. Shared planning time, if used purposefully, can be an effective support structure for a learning community.

Another approach I would advocate would be a structured teacher mentoring program. Mentoring provides new and experienced teachers with a powerful way to enhance their instructional practices as they reflect about teaching and learning. For new teachers mentors are invaluable, allowing them to enhance their teaching abilities and integrate into the social and structural fabric of the school. For the senior faculty, the mentoring program provides an influx of new ideas and a chance for veteran teachers to share their collected knowledge with new generations of peers. This partnership of sharing and reflecting fosters a sense of learning together as the norm for new teachers, and in turn supports the learning organization in the long run.

Because effective communication is essential to sharing, I would work with a team of lead teachers and staff to develop a standardized plan of communication. This could involve training in such protocols as Cognitive Coaching, Crucial Conversations, or Peer Coaching, all of which contain
strategies for reflective teaching practices and communicating effectively with others. Defining a meeting protocol that allows for effective, efficient sharing and reflecting can be a key element in a supportive yet structured learning environment.

Once the structure is in place for effective adult learning, the content of the learning needs to be provided in a way that benefits both individual teachers and the school as a whole. To enhance the quality and cohesiveness of the training, staff development should be focused on a common goal tied with the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP), the framework for improvement provided to the state. Because student performance data is used as a measure of the CSIP, the plan should drive the staff expectations and the learning for teachers. Using the school improvement plan to drive staff development will allow for measurable results as well. As NAESP (2001) states, “The success of professional development activities should be based not only on whether teacher practice changes, but on whether student performance increases” (p. 43).

Finally, I need to continue my learning as a principal. In doing this, I not only increase my knowledge base, but model my beliefs for those around me. Some of the best learning opportunities for me will come from the teachers themselves as I become a member of their study groups or participate in staff development sessions. Not only will I become more knowledgeable about the
subject at hand, the interaction will help build relationships with other staff members.

Successful principals are involved in the professional development of their teachers. Attending faculty professional development activities, participating, listening and learning not only empowers the principal, but it strengthens the overall school community and builds a bridge of interest and engagement between the principal and the teacher. (NAESP 2001, p. 51)

When the principal becomes a student, enlightening thoughts can form. Through learning new ideas and hearing the reflections of others, I will become a better leader and practitioner. Frances Hesselbein, (as cited in Fullan, 2003) clearly notes the role the principal should play in the learning organization,

Because all organizations need to be learning organizations to be effective, the principal has to be the lead learner. If principals do not go out of their way to learn more (inside and outside of the school), regardless of what the system is doing they cannot become a pressure point for positive change. (p. 20)

**Building a Clear Vision**

How will we know where to go if we don’t know where we are going?

One of my roles as administrator will be to help build a shared vision, and to create a plan to fulfill that vision with staff and students. The Cambridge Dictionary of American English (2003, ¶ 1) defines vision as, “The ability to imagine how a country, society, industry, etc., will develop in the future and to plan in a suitable way”. There are many implications with having a shared vision.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) write:
Developing a clear vision shared by the entire school community can have a significant impact. Principals find that shared vision:

- Motivates and energizes people
- Creates a proactive orientation
- Gives direction to people within the organization
- Establishes specific standards of excellence
- Creates a clear agenda for action. (p. 84).

Having a shared vision is rewarding in many ways, but I believe there are two significant benefits: with a shared vision there becomes a sense of a shared connectedness within the organization, and there tends to be motivating factors involved with the implementation of a shared vision. Steve Jobs of Apple Computers would agree with this second benefit. He is quoted as saying, “If you are working on something exciting that you really care about, you don’t have to be pushed. The vision pulls you” (Costa, Kallick, ¶ 3).

Creating a vision statement and a plan for action is a long-term process. As a new principal, I would first collect a team of parents, student, teachers, and community members to take part in a vision committee. Together we would assess the current situation through open discussions with community members, teachers, students and parents. This dialogue would include current thoughts and frustrations about the school. Peter Senge (2003) refers to this as “determining the current reality” (Creative Tension section, ¶ 1). According to Senge, defining the current reality is an essential step in the process: “Vision without an understanding of current reality will more likely foster cynicism than
creativity” (Creative Tension section, ¶ 5). Smith and Lucas (2000) point out a benefit of determining the current reality: “The process addresses pent-up tensions over current problems and concerns. People, both individually and collectively, experience enormous relief when the system finally gives voice to their problems and concerns” (p. 290).

After determining the current reality, our vision team would move to a shared vision process. This process would involve all members of the learning community reflecting on their own personal vision, desires and hopes for the children in our community. This would be a time for me to voice my personal vision as well. After sharing our ideas, we would begin the process of narrowing our beliefs into a common purpose for our learning organization. This will be a long process that will involve much dialogue, reflection, and soul searching, but it is important work. Costa and Kallick (2003) state:

At the center of any vision is a core set of beliefs... The work of shared vision requires a deeper understanding of not just the rhetoric of what we believe, but how our actions must be changed to be congruent with the organization's beliefs as well as with the self. (Search for Integrity section, ¶ 1.)

It will be my role to work with the vision committee to facilitate this process throughout my first year.
A clear vision provides destination for the learning community, but the destination will not be reached if the completed vision is not distributed widely and concisely. Once defined, the vision must be shared with all members of our learning community. Fullan (2001) discusses the potential vision can have for attracting the energies and commitment of those involved with a learning organization when defined together and shared appropriately. He says, “Visions can act as attractors, but only when they are shared at all levels of the organization and only when they emerge through experience, thereby generating commitment” (p. 115).

Once the original document is completed, the vision committee works to establish a timeline of action, reflection and revision to ensure the vision becomes the standard of the learning community instead of a simple sign on our wall. Action toward living the mission will be exciting for some and uncomfortable for others. Smith and Lucas (2000) note, “People must have the inherent satisfaction of re-creating the school together, with one another’s support- including the support of those whom they have mistrusted in the past” (p. 291).

During this time we will need to reflect as a community, sharing ways we have lived our mission, and areas we need to improve. Late in the year I would like to invite parents, teachers, students and community members together for time of reflection of the vision. The purpose would be to refine the vision statement if necessary, or add new goals for the following school year. As Smith
and Lucas (2000) point out, "Vision is more powerful in light of experience" (p. 300). This shared vision would need to be reviewed again in the fall and beyond, creating a living document that evolves as we continue to improve as a learning organization, gain new staff, new students and new families.

Using Knowledge of Teaching and Learning

As the ones closest to the actual instruction, classroom teachers have the largest impact on student learning. There are a plethora of strategies, curriculum, and programs available to teachers; many are excellent tools to increase student achievement, while others remain questionable. Regardless of the program or curriculum taught, it is imperative for teachers to know the capabilities of their students and have the ability to adjust their instruction to meet the needs of their unique learners. Because of the implicit role instruction plays in student learning, an effective administrator must have thorough knowledge of best practice teaching instruction, and must communicate these practices to the staff. I believe teachers should use brain-based instructional strategies, instruction that reflects the theory of multiple intelligences, and the use of differentiation of instruction to meet the needs of every child.

In order for students to be successful learners, they need the support of caring teachers and an environment that is conducive to learning, where students can feel safe and trusted. Many students come from troubled homes with little
emotional and/or economic support. Cohen (2001) says it is school that can provide these students with the environment and essential skills, "...school can provide a consistently safe and supportive environment in which new cognitive and social skills may be effectively taught, learned and practiced" (p. 49).

This encouraging atmosphere is one of the core precepts of brain-based learning, which works hand-in-hand with a learning community. McBrien and Brandt (2003) suggest, "A relaxed, nonthreatening environment that removes students' fear of failure is considered best for brain-based learning" (¶ 3). Teachers can form an encouraging environment by ensuring students are supported in their thinking in a positive manner.

Brain-based teaching strategies also provide students with the appropriate instruction to enhance learning. By using hands-on activities such as manipulatives and real life projects, students make connections that are essential for learning. Author Patricia Wolfe (2001), an internationally known trainer and educational consultant who advocates brain-based teaching strategies, writes that "Concrete experience is one of the best ways to make strong, long-lasting neural connections. These experiences engage more of the senses and use multiple pathways to store - and therefore more ways to recall - information" (p.188). I also encourage teachers to use real-life problem solving experiences, an approach Wolfe endorses: "Many of our strongest neural networks are formed by actual experience" (p. 138).
Another teaching theory teachers should use on a regular basis is that of multiple intelligences (M.I.). Given (2002) defines multiple intelligences as, "...relatively new ways of viewing the complex nature of mental factors that impact learning" (p.12). Multiple intelligences provides three great benefits to both instructors and students: (a) by supporting multiple intelligences, teachers send the message that all students have learning strengths and can learn; (b) through multiple intelligences strategies, students become better aware of their own learning needs and thus become more productive lifelong learners; and (c) teachers modify their instruction to meet the varied needs of students, increasing their knowledge of the subject at hand.

The theory of multiple intelligences has taken brain research one-step further. Teaching with the theory of multiple intelligences is tailoring instruction to meet the needs of learning styles. In a real-world setting, this would mean that a teacher would deliver instruction using a variety of methods tailored to ensure that all learning styles are being met. For instance, if a student learns better in the bodily-kinesthetic mode, that student might need to learn hand signals in conjunction with the letter sounds for more effective learning.

Taking advantage of these learning modes empower children as well. As students become knowledgeable about their learning mode, they in turn become more efficient and self-empowered learners. Campbell and Campbell (1999) point out, "With the belief firmly in place that all students possess strengths,
student talents can be used strategically. For example, when students struggle with a concept or skill, they can often jump-start their learning by accessing their strengths...” (p.10).

I feel teachers need to provide to students the necessary learning inventories so they may become knowledgeable about their own learning mode. Furthermore, as teachers model lessons encompassing varied learning styles, students will become comfortable with seeking out these different learning opportunities and begin to apply this to their own life.

While M.I. can have great impact in virtually any educational setting, some of the findings from schools that support M.I. indicate that the strategy might have a particularly positive impact on the performance of their at-risk populations:

A remarkable finding we discovered at the M.I. schools is that disparity among white and minority student achievement has been reduced or eliminated. Attendance at four of the six sites ... includes 50 percent or more minority students. Three of the schools... have high percentages of students living in poverty. Typically, such populations would be considered at-risk, and may students would be placed in remedial and/or intervention programs. By contrast all students at the MI sites are immersed in challenging academic content and methodologies. (Campbell & Campbell, 1999, p.96)

Along with brain-based teaching theory and the theory of multiple intelligences, I also support the use of differentiation of instruction as an effective
tool to meet the needs of all learners. Carol Ann Tomlinson (1999) refers to classroom teachers who differentiate instruction as,

...teachers who provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible, without assuming one student's road map for learning is identical to anyone else's. These teachers believe that students should be held to high expectations. (p. 2)

Teachers who differentiate their instruction respond to the needs of their learners, whether those learners are struggling students or individuals who excel in a subject. In a differentiated classroom, all students are assigned purposeful, meaningful work that best matches their ability level. With the wide variance of skills and talents in each classroom, instruction must be delivered in a way that is meaningful for children and maximizes their potential. Teachers who create differentiated units or lesson plans tailor their instruction to meet the needs of their learners according to their learning style, student readiness for the instruction, or student interest. Student outcomes can be differentiated according to the content being studied, the process of the learning, the product that is being made, or the learning environment. Whatever the mode of differentiation, the key element in creating a plan that is engaging and productive is high-quality curriculum and instruction. Tomlinson (2000) highlights five elements that she considers crucial for proper differentiated instruction. It will be my role as an administrator to monitor these elements and communicate their importance:
1. curriculum is clearly focused on the information and understandings that are most valued by an expert in a particular discipline;
2. lessons, activities, and products are designed to ensure that students grapple with, use, and come to understand those essentials;
3. materials and tasks are interesting to students and seem relevant to them;
4. learning is active; and
5. there is joy and satisfaction in learning for each student. (¶ 2).

Just as in the fostering of other elements of a positive learning environment, the process of implementing standardized learning strategies throughout the educational community is a key element to those strategies’ success.

Choosing the three main learning strategies for classroom implementation calls for a plan. As an administrator, I will first assess where teachers are in their education of these theories, and adjust the rollout of the strategies accordingly. If some members of our learning community prove to be highly knowledgeable in some or all of the three strategies outlined above, I would ask them to share their skills with the rest of the community. If that option is unavailable or unworkable, I would work with the staff to choose one strategy to develop a study group or pilot group format.

Because teacher’s confidence must be strong for a successful implementation, I would budget some funds to allow additional knowledge building outside of the workday at workshops or seminars. I would also consider several sessions of teacher release time for collaboration of ideas to enhance these
areas. In addition, staff development funds may be made available to support teacher in-service. I feel these theories are imperative in order for teachers to reach the needs our children.

Summary

Just as in my home life while growing up, a strong community of learning can set all its participants on a path of lifelong learning and enrichment. But those communities need to take the time to learn and reflect, share and grow. Schools need to be a learning organization, with all members of the organization learning, modeling learning and sharing what has been learned. Schools need to have a shared vision, and communicate that vision to everyone in the learning community. Along with this vision needs to be a plan of action to guide the stakeholders in achieving the vision, and a timeline including time for reflection on the vision. Lastly, as an administrator, I need to communicate to teachers my expectation of the use of best practice teaching strategies such as brain based learning, the theory of multiple intelligences, and differentiation of instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

There are many components of being an effective administrator. Not only do administrators need to be visionary, aware of instruction, and create a learning organization, but they must be leaders in other capacities as well. It is important for administrators to act as an advocate for all students, meeting their needs for the good of the whole. Furthermore, administrators are managers of a business,
following a budget, laws and business practices, as well as personnel issues. They are team players, working with families, business, community and cultural members to collaborate on ideas and issues. An effective administrator must be ethical; traits such as honesty and truthfulness are modeled and followed, allowing for a safe and trusting learning environment. Finally, it is important to realize that our educational system is part of a much larger system. It is the job of the administrator to recognize this and respond appropriately to encourage a learning environment that will bring success to all learners.

For me, the smell of coffee and crayons immediately triggers a flood of positive memories of growing up in a sharing, learning environment. I hope that, through the elements and strategies outlined in this paper, the school I lead and I can create a host of similar memories for generations to come.
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