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A Vision for Elementary Administration: a Reflective Essay

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A Vision for Elementary Administration: a Reflective Essay

Abstract

As a high school student I would have never dreamt that I would be in a profession as an educator. I had my life mapped out, nursing school and then gaining specialized training in the area of pediatrics. I should have known that college would open doors. In my sophomore year of college, I stood in front of the mirror in my dorm room and asked myself, "What do you really want to do with your life?" It was then when my heart answered me, a teacher. From that point forward, education has been my passion and life blood. It has been truly amazing that a profession can be fulfilling and provide a backdrop for my life and a very colorful one at that. This profession has allowed me to gain knowledge on a wide variety of topics from alternative assessment to multiple intelligences. I believe one of the most endearing facts about being an educator is the fact that it allows for a teacher to be a risk taker, be creative, and an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of students. As an educator and life long learner, I have always strived to be knowledgeable and informed of the current trends in education.

A VISION FOR ELEMENTARY ADMINISTRATION
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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Masters of Arts in Education

By

Beth Wright

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As a high school student I would have never dreamt that I would be in a profession as an educator. I had my life mapped out, nursing school and then gaining specialized training in the area of pediatrics. I should have known that college would open doors. In my sophomore year of college, I stood in front of the mirror in my dorm room and asked myself, “What do you really want to do with your life?” It was then when my heart answered me, a teacher. From that point forward, education has been my passion and life blood. It has been truly amazing that a profession can be fulfilling and provide a backdrop for my life and a very colorful one at that. This profession has allowed me to gain knowledge on a wide variety of topics from alternative assessment to multiple intelligences. I believe one of the most endearing facts about being an educator is the fact that it allows for a teacher to be a risk taker, be creative, and an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of students. As an educator and life long learner, I have always strived to be knowledgeable and informed of the current trends in education.

Upon graduating from Mount Mercy College in 1989, I had completed the required credits and was awarded a teaching certificate. The first year after graduation, I worked outside the of profession. This year was a year of trials and tribulations. I became doubtful if I would ever find work in my chosen profession. It was in the spring of this year that I became determined to become a

teacher and eventually become a principal. In receiving my first teaching contract at St. John / St. Nicholas School, I put the notion of going back to college out of my head. I was young and after my first year of teaching, I needed to obtain a firm foundation in teaching. During the first years of teaching I worked hard and drove myself to be the best that I personally could be. Then a paradigm shift happened in my life by simply reading one book, Control Theory in the Classroom by William Glasser (1986). We are mistaken if we believe that discipline, dropouts, and drugs are what is wrong with today's schools. Serious as these are, they are symptoms of a much larger underlying problem which is that far too many capable students make little or no effort to learn. Control theory, a new powerful explanation of how we behave, explains why this problem exists and how through learning teams, we can begin to solve it (Glasser, 1986). I was at a point in my life that I had to be in control of every minute factor in my classroom, my personal life and why students were at times unmotivated to learn. I realized that if this issue of control was not dealt with, I personally and professionally was on a one way street to disaster. It was then that I spent a great deal of time and energy in self reflection and trying to change the ways in which I viewed the various aspects of my life.

Once again I stood in front of the mirror and asked, "What do you want to do with your life?" In all of the self reflection that took place a variable that

remained the same was my profession. This time I realized that I wanted to expand my career in education and change my job role. So after obtaining the information several times from the department of administration and counseling, I finally decided I was ready to pursue a master's degree in administration. It was amazing to experience how natural the final decision was, sometimes when I have to make a major life decision I lose sleep over making the final decision. This was not the case with this decision. I came to the administration program with what I thought was a sound premise of what the role of an administrator was in a school setting. Needless to say, I did not know as much as I thought I did.

Throughout the course of this master's program, I have learned that the many facets of the job description take on many angles giving many colorful perspectives to the profession. I view the profession now like a diamond that has been cut and polished to a specific cut. Every time that the beholder looks at the beauty of that diamond, one sees or experiences a different angle that has been cut into that diamond. As in the role of an administrator, many angles and experiences will happen throughout the course of a day that will provide beauty and might even dull the brilliance to some degree. As a person who firmly believes in learning from every experience, the experiences that provide a dulling effect on the diamond will provide a learning experience and an opportunity to polish skills and view the experience from a different angle or perspective.

Personal Characteristics

Through this journey of becoming more knowledgeable about educational issues and practices of effective administrators, my prior view of the administrator's role has changed dramatically. I began with the premise that administrators had authority over all the various components in a school setting. Throughout my course work I have learned that there is a difference between being an administrator with authority/power and a leader. My preconceived notion of power was misdefined as I wanted authority. Through gaining knowledge and discernment of the career, I have realized that power can be transformed into leadership. Hemphill's Leadership model is representative of the variances between actual power and authority (accepted power). Power is defined as "the actuating force of the leader in the organization". Whereas leadership is defined "as the influence process which is a function of the personal characteristics of the leader, his/her followers, and the nature of the specific situation" (D.R. Jackson, personal communication, June 30, 1996). Leadership is a melding of the actual powers and accepted powers. It is very important as a future administrator to remember that actual power is earned by the administrator and that unaccepted power can be very destructive in a school setting. I believe that actual power for an administrator will empower the faculty, staff, parents, community, and students of any given school district. Therefore, creating a

cohesive learning environment for the betterment of all students' education.

Many times I have heard and witnessed administrators using unacceptable authority. One incident of an unacceptable power play quickly places a crack in the area of respect and can create an unpleasant environment.

Being a leader integrates many brilliant colors and cuts from the diamond. I firmly believe that an administrator needs to have open ears and eyes to all in the learning community and speak wisely on all issues. I believe that throughout my life my role models have taught me to think before I speak and to enhance my abilities to see the whole situation from every angle before making judgements. In a leadership role one must have a defined value system, confidence, and trust in people that surround the school environment. My value system is woven like threads in a tapestry containing my spiritual faith in a higher power, morals of what is right or wrong, and beliefs that all students can learn and be successful and that school should be a secure place for faculty and students. My personal confidence in my abilities has grown a great deal over the course of completing my master's degree program. During the class Introduction to Elementary Administration a quote was placed in the photocopied packets that has had a lasting impact on my confidence. It stated: "To think about the aims of education is to ask what kind of person, what kind of human competence, what kind of goals might be most desirable for the social order and the quality of civilized

existence” (D.R. Jackson, personal communication, June 1996). I always knew that I had great potential in education and had a grasp of what quality education should look like. I remember sitting in the class asking myself what kind of a person I was, I responded that I was a caring, compassionate, and honest person. As this kind of person, I truly believe that the education of our young people is every person’s responsibility on the face of this earth. In making that one response to the quote, I was affirmed that I was on the correct career path which helped in my confidence level that I was going to continue making a difference in education.

It is vitally important for all professionals and others involved in the educational setting to be empowered, trusted and feel valued as people and as professionals. An administrator can be in a symbolic relationship between leader and follower” (Burns,1978). James Burns coined this as transformative leadership. According to Burns, and Bennis and Nanus (1985) transformative leadership is more akin to the new paradigm of mutually shaping/ mutual causality. The needs, values, and goals of both leaders and followers mesh and create meaning and community in the context of the organization (Bennis & Nanus,1985). Sergiovanni (1984) refers to this new form of leadership as “cultural expression.” What is important is not so much the mastery of technical skills but rather what the leader stands for -- who he or she is. I believe that a

leader shapes and evaluates the goals of followers by creating with them a vision for the organization which incorporates their most basic needs for security and safety as well as fostering self - actualization and social responsibility. Bennis and Nanus (1985) note,

Leadership is “causative,” meaning that leadership can invent and create an institution that can empower employees to satisfy their needs.

Leadership is morally purposeful and elevating, which means, if nothing else, that leaders can, through deploying their talents choose purposes and visions that are based on the key values of the work force and create the social architecture that supports them. Finally, leadership can move followers to higher degrees of consciousness. The end result of the leadership we have advanced is empowerment, an organizational culture that helps employees generate a sense of meaning in their work and desire to challenge themselves to experience success. (p.218)

An administrator must be reflective in his or her practices and monitor the school environment. I believe that my observational skills of understanding group dynamics and accepting individual differences is a true strength. This skill of being reflective and observant will enhance my leadership abilities to empower others.

Administrative Philosophy

The ability to make judgments and decisions is a daily expectation in the role of a leader. These decisions and judgments must be made in the best interests of the school and the human beings involved. Each situation will have fluctuating circumstances that will prove to be challenging to an administrator. I believe that decisions need to be made with the knowledge of all factors being viewed and taken into consideration when making a decision. Knowledge is the key component. A leader must have good communication skills to ask questions to gain the necessary information to make pertinent decisions. I know that all decisions made in my administrative career will not be the correct decision for each situation; it is a human characteristic that everyone makes mistakes at various times in one's life. What is key is that I reflect on the mistakes and grow from them. I believe that if this is remembered by administrators the organization will remain flat in hierarchical nature and the respect for the leader and the followers will remain intact.

In many school districts across the nation, pressure from the government is being placed on schools to have higher standards for learners, therefore, producing productive citizens for the twenty first century. The issue of change is a common thread for an administrator. I must ask, How can change occur? First and foremost the answer is slowly. A leader must be observant and know the

maturity levels of the faculty. In conjunction with the maturity levels, the leader must also know how individual staff members stand on educational issues. By knowing the maturity, the leader must adapt the approach or style of leadership. This contingency model of leadership was developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1977). They suggest that the best leadership style is the one that matches the maturity level of followers. In the language of Hersey and Blanchard, the emphasis in leadership shifts from telling to selling, participating, and delegating as maturity in followers increase. They define maturity as the capacity to set high but attainable goals, willingness and ability to take responsibility, and education and / or experience of an individual or a group (Hersey & Blanchard, 1997). With every situation encountered in the educational setting the style must change therefore the administrator must be first aware and then have the ability to change the style in the leadership role. I believe that this is a key component to being an effective leader, the ability to understand the followers and adapt the leadership style to the specific situation. In administrative work the leader must have the ability to tell, sell the idea for change, participate in the situation, and delegate tasks when appropriate. An appropriate balance placing expectations on an individual or groups and the ability to engage in two way communication to give directives, to listen, be supportive, facilitating, and the ability to give

psychological strokes is necessary in the process of change in any educational institution.

In conjunction with situational leadership I believe in the philosophy or concept of site-based management. In working in a school district that is solely based on site-based management, this is the management style that I feel is most beneficial for a school. The benefit of site-based management is sharing of ideas and the joint decision making process between the principals, teachers and the community (Dreyfuss, 1988). I feel that there is better communication and the traditional mistrust and negative feelings towards the central administration is reduced when all adults in the learning community are involved. This involvement fosters a positive school image and home / school relations are greatly effected.

In the area of site-based management an administrator needs to make sure the roles of responsibility are clearly defined. Teachers often fall into a trap by waiting for the principal to take the first steps. This makes it confusing in something like site-based management, where you have a teacher chairperson but the principal is there all the time. It's a dance in which no one's sure who's leading, who's following, and what rhythm, you're supposed to be listening for. Some people are trying to waltz, and others are doing the rhumba. So you get a jumble of off - beat steps. People tend to figure that the principal is the real boss

in the school, so they look to the administrator for direction and guidance (Bolman & Deal, 1994).

In reflecting upon the various human beings that a leader must be in contact with on a daily basis, I compare any educational setting to a tree. A tree where humans involved in the school are the branches that overlap and intertwine in an undefined pattern. Whereas the trunk is the foundation of the education taking place in the school, for example the building, school grounds, the classrooms, and the philosophy or mission of the school. The trunk of the school must be well taken care of, nourished, always needing attention and being evaluated. The trunk of the tree gives a lasting first impression of the health of the tree. If the trunk is well taken care of it is a positive sign that the school is taken care of and pride is present in the owners of the tree. The owners of the school are the branches or the humans that provide the height and depth of the school. The owners of the tree are the faculty, staff, students, parents and the community at large. It is every persons responsibility to care for and protect the trunk and branches. These branches (teacher, staff, students, and parents) are an integral life blood of a school. Each one of these branches will be addressed in how I believe what their purpose is and how they should add shade to the trunk. An effective leader should always work towards making the branches grow and expand in knowledge and strength. To do this I need to develop a learning

community as illustrated by Sergiovanni (1994) in the book entitled Building Community in Schools. He states that: “Learning communities where members are committed to thinking, growing, and inquiring and where learning is for everyone an attitude as well as an activity, a way of life as well as a process” (p.71).

The branches representing the faculty and staff in the school provide the span of the branches always striving for quality in education and working for the common good of the school. Sergiovanni (1994) also states: “Professional communities where members make a commitment to the continuous development of their expertise and to the ideals of professional virtue” (p.71). I believe that the key phrase from this quote is a commitment to the continuous development. Being a team player and being actively engaged as a faculty member or staff member in the learning environment provides a strong support for the other components of the branches, students and parents. Education is a continuous source of life long learning for faculty and staff. As a leader one must always assess the needs of the adult learning community and be aware of adult learning styles. In conducting numerous staff development meetings during my practicum, I learned a great deal about how to conduct meetings. I feel that I am better equipped to enhance teacher development through this experience. Adult learning should be self directed, empowering the learner. Adult learning should

be experience based, letting the faculty know that as a leader you recognize and respect their past experiences, be open to concerns, and know the issues of the faculty. Adult learning should be collaborative. An effective administrator encourages teaming, support mentoring and dialogue, and rewards efforts. A leader should provide a message of respect for diversity, express value in risk taking, and personalize relationships within appropriate limits. Always having a sense of humor and staying flexible will help support the faculty and staff branches of the tree.

I believe that leadership is a process of action words that will enable the faculty and staff branches to fully develop into the strongest and supportive branches. Verbs like challenging, enabling, modeling, inspiring, and encouraging are words to live by as a prospective leader. I first heard these words applied to leadership by watching a video tape in my Introduction to Elementary Administration based on the book The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations by James M. Kouzes and Barry Posner (1990). This tape made a lasting impact on me on how to be an effective leader. Upon watching this video I purchased the book. “You have to be brave enough to fail.” (Kouzes & Posner, 1990, p. 156). As a leader I must be an entrepreneur, not be afraid of the future and must be strong to experiment and take risks even though one might fail. As leader, the faculty and staff will be

permitted to take risks and learn from those mistakes. Which flows into the next verb “enabling” others to act. Providing a secure environment where planning collaboratively and team spirit is present will provide an open door for people to feel that they can and must make a difference to the other branches and leaves. Modeling the way for others is an extremely important task. I believe that leaders lead by example and being visible in the building. I am a strong believer in the fact that I would never ask anyone to do anything that I myself would not do. It is important that the faculty and staff members see an administrator working towards and inspiring a shared vision. This vision must be created together to build and express a positive outlook for the future. Lastly, but importantly, a leader must encourage the heart, praising the branches in what they do to provide success in the learning environment. This concept of encouraging the heart of faculty and staff will have a tremendous effect of the climate on the school and to a degree trickle to the other branches and leaves represented on the tree. Therefore creating a tree trunk filled with team spirit, support, and empowerment.

The other branches that are represented on the tree are that of the parents and community. I am a firm believer that parents are children’s first teachers and need to be involved with their child’s education. In past years the walls of a school have been used as a barrier between the school and community. Thus, a change from a “closed” to an “open” relationship between the school and its

community may necessitate some careful attention (Crowson, 1992). As I have progressed to teaching upper grade levels, I have realized that parents are less involved with their child's education and the focus becomes on sports related events. I question if this would be the case if the school to which I am employed had a history of being open. I believe that the school is to be a integrated part of the community not a separate entity. In the summer of 1997, for my School and Community class I developed a project to have more parents and the external community become involved in the school setting. A plan that consisted of a mentoring program, development of a partner in education, and a volunteer program. I learned that getting these items up and running is a great deal of work and support needs to be present from the administrator and school board. The development and implementation of this plan did not go as planned. This experience provided insight for me to not have numerous large tasks be implemented by one lone ranger. I learned that it is extremely important to be able to delegate tasks to other people and that parents are willing and capable of helping implement plans.

I learned from observing my current administrator that parents need to be acknowledged and made to feel welcome in the school setting. If parents and the outside community are not invited in for positive things that are going on in the school, it makes dealing with parents difficult for an administrator when the

situation is a more difficult one to deal with. An administrator needs to have excellent social skills, the ability to communicate effectively, encourage and value each and every person who enters the school doors, and be visible to the parents and outside community. All of the above skills are of importance, but the core of each is the skill of communication. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are all forms of communication to which we spend hours doing each of these during the course of a day. Communication is the most important skill in life. One skill that I have developed throughout the course of completing my degree is that of listening. Seek first to understand. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply (Covey, 1989).

If an administrator conducts him or herself in a manner to where the parents respect them as an individual and as an administrator, positive public relationships will be present in the school setting. Therefore, the branches of the parents and external community will continue to grow and be very supportive of the trunk and other branches.

Finally, for the section of the tree that provides shade, grows when provided with light and water, and sways in the breeze, and provides beauty to the tree. The students are the leaves, capping off the top of the tree. Students provide a great deal of life to the school. They are to be active in learning,

reaching to be the best person that they can be. They like leaves need to be nurtured and need consistency in their lives. I am afraid to say this but this is a reality, many students in today's school need to be nurtured and have structure. Schools are the only place where some of these leaves have this life need met. As an administrator, I will need to make sure that school is a safe environment where nurturing takes place. Rules and regulations will need to be established reflecting to where each student will be dealt with in a way to which their dignity will remain in tact. Fairness and consistency will try to be achieved, based on each situation. Schools are for children. Teachers, administrators, and support staff all do the work they do for children. Students spend approximately 12,000 hours of their lives in school. Much of what they learn about adulthood happens in school. They learn by watching and interacting with those who teach them and those who discipline them. They learn how to relate to others and how to solve problems with people. They learn what happens when they stretch and sometimes break the limits. They learn about their individuality and how they are perceived by others. They learn about the responsibility of being part of a group. They learn how to express the way they feel and the way they think. These lessons are long lasting (Curwin, 1988). What an awesome responsibility not to be taken lightly by any person - administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and the community.

In my practicum class, I had the opportunity to shadow an administrator. This was an experience that provided me with a positive role model as an administrator. The match in our philosophy's was remarkable. It made me extremely excited to see someone function in a very positive way with teachers, parents and students. The students respected him in his words and actions. This administrator took an active role in his school, never sitting behind his desk, always out and about in the school and with the students. It was very visible that the leaves in this school provided the administrator with a calming effect. This effected his whole being as a person thus effecting the school environment.

Each leaf is a different shape, size, uniqueness in beauty, and has a wide variety of needs. As a future administrator, I feel that it is extremely important to know the students on a first name basis and know a little something about each one. When a person is acknowledged by their given name or something is discussed of common interest respect is given. This knowing of the students will help when dealing with discipline, because the student knows that the administrator knows him or her for other areas of interest, not just for negative issues that happen in that child's life.

Professional Vision

It is my professional vision to someday in the near future be allowed to cut and polish the already existing diamond that I have embraced. The profession of an administrator is one that is developed and defined by practical experiences in the presence of beautiful trees. I value the learning and experiences provided at the University of Northern Iowa while defining the clarity and cut of my own personal diamond. I see a person who will function in the profession with integrity and always striving to provide opportunities for growth of the tree.

As I conclude this paper, I must leave one final analysis of what I believe leadership must entail. I spoke earlier of the leaves swaying in the wind providing a calming effect on a human being. A book that has been quite significant in my personal development of my leadership abilities is that of Leading with Soul by Bolman and Deal (1995). I cannot begin to tell you the number of times that I have embraced this book gaining new knowledge and meaning about myself and others each time it is read. Heart, hope, and faith, rooted in soul and spirit, are necessary for today's managers to become tomorrow's leaders, for today's sterile bureaucracies to become tomorrow's communities on meaning, and for our society to rediscover its ethical and spiritual center. Leading with soul requires giving gifts from the heart that breathe spirit and passion into your life (Bolman & Deal, 1995). The gifts that

create a strong school environment, swaying of the leaves, are love, authorship, power, and significance. I truly believe that if these intangible gifts are given freely and received by each person in the school environment a great achievement in human development, both academically and spiritually will be obtained for the common good of all.

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.

Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?

I have no idea.

My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,

and I intend to end up there. (p. 24)

- Rumi (1984)

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