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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

One day in mid-November, Mr. Al Swenson, my elementary principal, approached me about my professional goal to receive my master's degree and become an elementary principal. Al informed me at that time of his thought to officially retire. Al has a love and passion for education and children; therefore, he had no desire to leave the administrative position at Sacred Heart without feeling fairly certain the school will continue to thrive as an excellent educational opportunity. When Al was asked to step in and assist Sacred Heart administratively, the school had just been through several years of less than desirable administration. The board, teachers, staff, and parents were quite unsure of the school's vitality, would/could Sacred Heart survive? Al had a seemingly tough job of public relations ahead of him. After four years, fantastic work had been done to bring up the overall morale of the school community. I see now the vision Al had for the Sacred Heart school community and its' place in the whole community. The vision is what the principal brings to the position which holds 2 his/her beliefs of where the school is directing itself for the future (Jaekel, Wendel, & Hoke, 1994). A vision is the result of dreams in action. The vision is developed by leaders through talking and listening to others (Barker, J.A., 1990)

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Beth Behnke
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One day in mid-November, Mr. Al Swenson, my elementary principal, approached me about my professional goal to receive my master's degree and become an elementary principal. Al informed me at that time of his thought to officially retire. Al has a love and passion for education and children; therefore, he had no desire to leave the administrative position at Sacred Heart without feeling fairly certain the school will continue to thrive as an excellent educational opportunity. When Al was asked to step in and assist Sacred Heart administratively, the school had just been through several years of less than desirable administration. The board, teachers, staff, and parents were quite unsure of the school's vitality, would/could Sacred Heart survive? Al had a seemingly tough job of public relations ahead of him. After four years, fantastic work had been done to bring up the overall morale of the school community. I see now the vision Al had for the Sacred Heart school community and its' place in the whole community. The vision is what the principal brings to the position which holds

his/her beliefs of where the school is directing itself for the future (Joekel, Wendel, & Hoke, 1994). A vision is the result of dreams in action. The vision is developed by leaders through talking and listening to others (Barker, J.A., 1990). The story of the man and the starfish illustrates to me the beauty of vision in action. In Barker's film (1990) he shared "The Star Thrower" taken from Loren Eiseley's book "The Unexpected Universe."

One day a man appeared to be dancing on the beach. He would run to the sand, bend down, reach to the ground, leap back to the edge of the water, and appear to throw something into the ocean. As I moved closer, I could see that the man was bending down to pick up a starfish, run back to the water, and toss the starfish back into the water. After watching the man do this a couple of times, I went over to speak with the man. Because there are thousands of starfish lying on the beach, I asked why he chose to continue running up and down the shoreline

tossing one starfish back into the water at a time. How could he by himself make a difference for the starfish? Without saying a word, he ran up on the sand, bent down, picked up a starfish, ran back to the water, and tossed it back into the water. At that moment, he turned to me and said, "It made a difference to that one."

The man in the story had a positive vision for the future. Al brought to the private school principalship a positive vision for its' future. Al found it essential to have something significant yet to do in life. By sharing his numerous years of experience and community respect, Al gave meaning to life for those in his presence.

Knowing Al's extensive background and passion for children, I asked him to be my mentor through my coursework and into my first years of principalship. He willingly allowed for open communication so as to assist in the development of strong leadership skills, attributes, and a vision for my principalship (Schmidt, W.H. & Finnigan, F.P., 1993).

I began my reflection with abundant questions. Why me for principalship? What did Al and other leaders, I respected, see in my capabilities? Have I got what it takes to lead other educators effectively? I have seen the vision Al brought to Sacred Heart and how he carried out his vision successfully. I am now aware of one attribute in myself that sparked his interest in my leadership ability. I know that I am effective in the area of public relations, as is Al. "Public relations is relating with the public or publics, openly and honestly" (Hoyle, J.R., English, F.W., & Steffy, B. E., 1990). At one point in my teaching career, I made application to move to the fifth grade position when it became available. Al informed me that as long as he was the principal I would remain at the primary level for the positive public relations. "The school's image... depends greatly on its public relations, and its public relations depend greatly on its principal" (Hines, R.W., 1993). This became quite apparent through Al's ability to communicate effectively with the school's publics and his strategic

placement of staff. It is important to remember that principal ends in "pal." Just as the title indicates, this person understands that everyone matters and encourages everyone to do their best.

I firmly believe Al and other leaders noted some of my other leadership qualities as I worked to demonstrate effective teaching strategies and people skills. Now the exploration, reflection, and discovery begins for me to find those qualities and develop the leader in me.

As I reflect on the many courses I have taken in my preparation for elementary administration, I have found myself asking what kind of leader do I wish to become. I desire to be an effective leader; one who empowers others, builds team spirit, and shares in the decision making process that strives to build consensus. I envision a school that exemplifies a flock of geese in flight which exhibits the capability to share the lead. Researchers learned that as each bird flaps its' wings it creates an updraft for the bird immediately following

it. By flying in a "V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 11% greater flying range. People who share a common direction and sense of teamwork or community effort can get where they are going quicker and easier, because they are traveling on the "updraft" of each other (Hay, V.M., 1993).

The flock has the same destination with multiple options on how to get there. If we have the same sense, as a goose, we will stay in formation with our team members who are heading the same direction we're going. When the lead goose gets tired, it rotates back in the formation and another goose flies the point of the "V". It pays team members to take turns doing the tough jobs. This allows the individual a sense of ownership in the group effort. Walker and Peel (1993) noted that the roles of administrators and teachers are changing as the schools are in reform. Therefore, all those involved need to see these roles as collaborative and working together towards a common goal in the education process. I see this occurring in education within the notion of empowerment. As

a developing leader in education, I see the necessity to empower or give ownership to those individuals involved so the common goal can be achieved. Those leaders who work along side staff and community can create an excellent environment for students to learn. Principals, as democratic leaders, share their vision and empower others to make it a reality.

In addition to empowerment, Peel and Walker (1994) state four desirable leadership qualities found in principals: (1) a strong commitment to school reform and a belief that by sharing the decision making, it is definitely better for teachers and students; (2) a willingness to take risks where trust in teacher ideas and capabilities is essential; (3) a willingness to communicate openly with all those involved to bring about a comfortable environment with the understanding all "agree to disagree" from time to time; (4) an awareness of potential problems where one develops strong proactive measures and realizes reform takes time (p.42). As a leader

who envisions the importance of shared decision making, I am finding these qualities listed above to be the beginning basis for reflection and development of my personal leadership style.

I witnessed Peel and Walker's (1994) number (1), a strong commitment to school reform and a belief that by sharing the decision making, it is definitely better for teachers and students, throughout my teaching experiences in the private sector. When working in a private school, you become a vital part in the development of the school's direction. You are asked and expected to take part in virtually all decision making processes and serve on a great number of committees where you are the decision making body. The idea of shared decision making is nothing new to the private sector where community, family, and togetherness is decades old. Al exhibited this quality often by entrusting program development to us and allowing us to do what we truly felt was best for the children and the families we served. He always said, "You are

the experts at what you do. I am here to help you teach it in the most effective way you can to these young people." A leader, like Al, empowers others to own and make sound educational decisions and share ideas. Leithwood (1992) stated that individuals who work under this leadership are noted in research to be more committed to school function and energized to do their very best. I, too, will respect teacher expertise and ask them to guide me to understand how their decisions were reached on a given topic.

There were times however, when as a staff and administration we did not see eye to eye. Because as mentioned in Glickman's seven ironies (1990), the more an empowered school works collaboratively, the more individual differences and tensions among the staff members become obvious. I find this quality to fall under Peel and Walker's (1994) number (3), a willingness to communicate openly with all those involved to bring about a comfortable environment with the understanding all "agree to disagree" from time to

time. Al almost encouraged the staff to disagree on some issues, especially when he played the devil's advocate. He fostered an environment which said it was all right to voice your opinion without ridicule. To achieve an open environment a principal will communicate with openness and clarity; develop confidence in others; encourage and share risks; solicit honest feedback; plus, listen and learn (Schmidt & Finnigan, 1993). Al felt that we made distinct changes that made a positive impact on the school program when we were probed to come to some consensus and truly listen to each other. These times were uncomfortable, but I noticed the staff grew closer and more aware of how we all played an important role in the overall educational process. No one teacher or part of the program was any better than any other because were it not for each component, the other components would not exist. As a principal I will try to foster team spirit which Al had done so effectively. I want the staff to realize, if they do not already, that we are all in the business to work collaboratively and do what is best for children (Maeroff, 1993).

As I think about Peel & Walker's (1994) number (2), a willingness to take risks where trust in teacher ideas and capabilities is essential, I recall an incident this Spring. Al portrayed a strong ethic of caring and trust. I was encouraged by the assistants to the superintendent in the Archdiocese to make application for fall as a principal. They felt strongly that I was what the schools were looking for and felt that I need not wait another year. So I went ahead and began the tedious process of application to a variety of schools. I was gone for six straight weekends, taking two night courses, teaching full time, maintaining a household, and a family life. I wondered how I ever survived, but I made it. However, Al played a large part in the process of survival. He was supportive of my efforts no matter how difficult the pressure became from the staff. The Monday morning after I had accepted the principal position at RHCL-Rickardsville, Holy Cross, Luxemburg consolidated school--I approached Al to request a few days off to catch my breath. I needed to get our

house on the market and finish up some graduate work for classes. He granted me some release time. Unfortunately, the short leave of absence came with disturbance from other teachers who saw his action as favoritism towards me. His response back was, "I would have done it for any one of you under the same circumstance." I was grateful! I felt much better about returning to work after a couple of days. I actually thought all was calm on the homefront. How wrong I was. The day I came back Al informed me of a highlighted note he received from two staff members indicating policies I had broken. He responded to them firmly and with irritation, that he will stand behind his decision. Their complaint was that I should not be paid for my time off and for the continuing education credits. Al heard and understood their concerns; however, he became extremely irritated by their spiteful behavior towards me. As a temporary solution, he paid my salary out of his own pocket. Al took a risk and stood up for his beliefs and values no matter what the cost. A quality I

most definitely have in my leadership characteristics. I know that when I believe in something strongly and have the facts to back up my convictions I will stand up for what I believe. I am aware that at times as a leader I will have to stand alone. I am willing to take the risks necessary to do what is in the best interest for children. Reflecting back to my overwhelmed feelings and obligations, Al and I both knew what was best for the children in my classroom and for myself; time off. A professor I had recently shared "when things seemingly get out-of-whack, when conflicts emerge, when things are unclear, that is the call for pause and thinking. There are rules and there are rules; there are relationships and there are relationships. Leading from the 'ethics of justice' will keep leadership traditional. Leading from the 'ethics of care' will yield meaning to lives" (Dr. P. Krysinski, Personal Communication, May 21, 1994). I, too, will know someday as a principal when you need to go against the rule book and do what is best for the human beings involved.

As I view number (4), an awareness of potential problems where one develops strong proactive measures and realizes reform takes time, as listed in qualities by Peel and Walker (1994), I see my internal conflict with total empowerment. I truly desire to be an empowering body in the administrative role. My conflict comes when I think about mandates imposed on the principal and the instructional program. I envision a happy medium where teachers, staff, parents, children, and administration can be empowered to make decisions collaboratively. As stated in Rosen (1993), the more power that is shared, the more powerful the principal becomes due to empowering of capable others. I will scout out those individuals that can be trusted and entrusted to assist in the decision making process.

So what is my overall vision for the RHCL-- Rickardsville, Holy Cross, Luxemburg consolidated school--I will lead in the fall of 1994? I like the way Barker (1990) put it, "Vision without a dream is only a vision. Action without

vision passes the time. Vision with action can change the world." I envision a school that is based on the idea of empowerment with action which can change the future. I believe that individuals come to work wanting to do their best and do what is in the best interest for children. Therefore, I long to create a work environment that: encourages risk taking without fear of ridicule or punitive action; seeks collaboration; builds consensus; solicits assistance in decision making; and supports teacher efforts. In my opinion were it not for children, parents, and staff there would be no school in need of an instructional leader. The vision is created through a leader's dream, but a vision is not a reality until the educators make it happen. The challenge, therefore, lies in replacing old attitudes and concepts with new ones (Duffy, 1994). Finally, as quoted in Glickman (1990), "I'm the legal authority, but decisions about schoolwide educational improvements are the prerogative of all professional educators. I'll sink or swim based on the decision of a body of intelligent people" (p. 73).

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