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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

In the past 10 years, many aspects of American culture have changed dramatically. One aspect of American culture is our economic system, based on individual enterprise, entrepreneurship, and competition. In the workplace, the goal is to "get to the top. 11 Even though the goal may remain the same, the avenues needed to reach the goal have been completely remodeled. We are becoming an automated, information-based society. We are no longer held within the confines of an immediate area, but can become informed of new developments worldwide in a matter of minutes. As we view these changes from an educational aspect, does it not make sense that our traditional views of what a school should "look like" need to keep up with growing demands of technology in the workplace?

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY

SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

———————

by

Linda Christine Blau

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In the past 10 years, many aspects of American culture have changed dramatically. One aspect of American culture is our economic system, based on individual enterprise, entrepreneurship, and competition. In the workplace, the goal is to "get to the top." Even though the goal may remain the same, the avenues needed to reach the goal have been completely remodeled. We are becoming an automated, information-based society. We are no longer held within the confines of an immediate area, but can become informed of new developments worldwide in a matter of minutes. As we view these changes from an educational aspect, does it not make sense that our traditional views of what a school should "look like" need to keep up with growing demands of technology in the workplace?

Another aspect of American culture that has changed is the family structure. Single parenting, working mothers, and drug and alcohol abuse have affected the children who are entering our schools today. Many of the typical routines that were normally accomplished in the home are now assumed to be the school's responsibility.

As I reflect on my own teaching career, the changes designed to meet the needs of students today have been increasingly apparent. I have seen curriculum changes in technological areas such as computer education, networking to classrooms all over the United States and the world, and interactive videos. There have

been changes in literature-based reading, integrated curricula, and expanded efforts to teach problem-solving and decision-making skills. We, as educators, are also dealing with social skills needed to make a child successful in future endeavors. At-risk programs, conflict resolution skills, cooperative learning strategies, additional programs such as breakfast and after school activities, integration of guidance into the curriculum, programs which help students accept and appreciate cultural diversity, and others which treat the social skills our students need to be successful in society are all part of a repertoire of skills needed in education today.

In order to meet all of the challenges that face education today, effective leaders need to aggressively assume the responsibility to initiate reforms needed in education. There are four areas of effective leadership which I feel are absolutely essential for success in the principalship: (a) a vision of where you want your school to be in the future; (b) commitment to a quality school; (c) involvement of parents and community in education; and (d) reflection on the past, present, and future.

Vision for the Future

At a faculty meeting a few years ago, our administrator discussed the mission statement of the Waterloo Schools. A few snickering comments revealed that anybody could come up with the statement "All children can learn" after spending a weekend at a

retreat. Eventually, someone mentioned that they would like to see them try to teach Billy. Obviously, the mission statement did not represent a belief shared by all.

I believe that an administrator cannot provide leadership if he/she does not understand the direction his/her school is going. My first objective as an administrator is to clarify my vision. The degree to which the administrator holds a clear vision, has the skills to share and actualize it, and understands the school's culture, the greater the chance a strong educational program will be established (Boston, 1991).

This vision should focus on the repertoire of skills needed to meet our school's changing population. Included in this repertoire is the awareness of the many cultures and family structures represented by students and staff. Every school has a unique personality which reflects its history, climate, and relationships. I have found that each school I taught in had different needs, and the vision must reflect those needs. Comparative data on achievement across the nation led to the conclusion that content which focuses on cultural diversity is more important than instructional time (Glatthorn, 1986). This focus on content in a curriculum should also apply to incorporating a multitude of ideas that your diverse staff and students can share with you in developing the vision. I find this to be an exciting prospect and will make every effort to see that

everyone in the school plays a role in establishing the values and direction which will prepare our students to be successful in a changing world.

Needed changes in curriculum should also be a part of the leader's vision. Teaching the many years that I have, there have been a number of state mandates thrust upon the schools. Often the school receives the mandate, and then quickly tries to enforce it with no real belief or conviction from the staff. Faculty members voice the opinion, "Well, we have to do it, so let's get it done with." I believe that an administrator with vision will make changes that are needed because of the school's vision for betterment rather than wait for mandates to be thrust upon them. They also do not let unwise mandates get in the way of the accomplishment of their vision. William Daggett (1989) feels we should be teaching specific core skills in American education, each skill being dependent on one another and directed to the future of our students in school. These skills include the basics (reading, writing, and mathematics), keyboarding, data manipulation, concepts and principles of technology, resource management, problem solving and decision making, economics of work, human relations, applied math and science, and career planning. Many of these core skills can be related to the growing demands of technology in the workplace. I find them all to be an important part of the curriculum today. Within my own experience,

I have been able to take part in devising a five-year plan for technology at Kingsley School. We looked at such important aspects as teacher inservice, budgeting for hardware along with a time line for purchasing, curriculum integration of technological skills, and ways to promote the growth in the classroom to our community. This plan is part of our vision and I am aware of how, as an administrator, working with a select group to devise a plan of this type can be beneficial to an entire staff. These core skills can be taken a step further by incorporating in our vision a purpose that all instruction provide a connection for students that can be applied to future life skills.

A principal needs to make a decision for change. This task cannot be complete if other people do not accept the new way of doing old things, or the job of doing new things. Drucker (1985) shared four things we need to remember: (a) pick the future as against the past; (b) focus on opportunity rather than problems; (c) choose your own direction, rather than getting on the bandwagon; and (d) aim high, aim for something that will make a difference, rather than something that is "safe" and easy to do.

Determining a school's vision is not an overnight process. In the class Introduction to Educational Administration, we learned that the organization and control of schools is based on the perspective of open systems. This means that there is an interdependence between the schools and their external

environment. Because of this interdependence, we must heed the concerns of the parents and the community. The Iowa Department of Education (1988) suggests an on-going needs assessment to help develop a school philosophy and to determine the areas of student performance, knowledge, and attitudes which are judged to be the most crucial. I feel that a needs assessment can also reveal to the public the areas that educators feel are crucial to continued success in the school system. It gives the community insight by the types of questions being asked. It can be a quiet, but useful tool in two-way communication. Many diverse thoughts can be gathered from analysis of a needs assessment and is a beginning step to moving education in the right direction.

Faidley and Musser (1989) have observed that in the industrial world, changes occur when the organizational vision is developed by the leader and includes involvement of people at all levels to attain the vision. This vision involves risks. Anyone who proceeds outside the boundaries of traditional education is subject to controversy. By involving faculty, students, and community, I will be building commitment to the vision and exposing students to an innovative and progressive education.

A vision for the future naturally will move to some kind of change. When quality schooling becomes the priority, an effective leader will develop a plan of action to fit the ideals presented in the vision.

The Principal's Commitment to Quality Schools

Quality schools are marked by harmony and a sense of purpose (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1991). This is not a commitment that is followed by a select few. It must be shared by faculty, students, and community. Once the vision for the school has been established and accepted, a plan for change must be initiated. The abilities a principal must possess to accomplish this change include both personal and professional growth attributes.

The NAESP (1991) suggests several proficiencies a principal must demonstrate. Following is a list of a few of the proficiencies suggested: (a) exercising vision and involving everyone in the accomplishment of the school's mission, (b) recognizing individual needs of staff and students, (c) applying effective human relations skills, (d) developing leadership of others, (e) analyzing information, (f) delegating responsibility and providing support, (g) coordinating use of resources, (h) exploring and developing educational concepts, (i) bonding school and community, (j) initiating and managing change, and (k) participating in professional groups.

I do not believe you can look at lists of proficiencies as separate skills to develop without applying them to the context of the vision you have projected for your school. The list is lengthy and overwhelming to a beginning principal. When you first

enter a new principalship, you need to decide exactly where your
school is functioning in relationship to the vision which you have
in mind. This can be done by investigating where your school has
been in the past and where it is functioning at the present time.
As an administrator, I will observe present teaching strategies.
I will communicate with staff members my ideas and listen to
theirs. I will find out what kinds of inservice they have been
attending. Can I see growth in the school in the past 10 years,
or are teaching practices staying the same? At this point, I will
need to decide in what direction my school should be going.

Fullan (1990) has identified three major steps in bringing
about change: (a) initiation, (b) implementation, and
(c) institutionalization. The initiation phase must be linked to
a school need. The principal is going to be playing a key role in
instructional leadership by acting as a catalyst in initiating and
monitoring the change. He or she should be encouraging teachers
to develop their leadership skills. Many of today's leaders
(Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Rowh, 1983; Maeroff, 1988) agree that
empowerment is crucial to strengthening quality. Cunard (1990)
feels that principals who share leadership with teachers do not
give up the responsibility of leadership. This principal is
becoming more effective because empowered teachers are more likely
to maximize their own potential. There are many avenues to
promote leadership. Teachers can be responsible for elements of

staff development. A team of teachers can serve as the instructional leaders to help meet the school's needs. Peer coaching is valued as a tool for changing or enhancing teaching strategies. The climate is being set for effective teaching (Fallon, 1979).

One of the most productive ways to guarantee change is through staff development. Fullan (1990) conceives of staff development as including any activity or process intended to improve skills, attitudes, understandings, or performance in present or future roles. I will start by locating staff members who will help me advocate the need for change. Then I will carefully diagnose the starting points for teacher development (Leithwood, 1990). In many of my classes, I have been exposed to situational leadership. Every staff member is different; the principal needs to recognize this and make decisions as to how guidance is provided. One way to look at the maturity of an individual is his/her ability and willingness to take responsibility for directing his/her own behavior in a particular area (Blanchard, Hersey, & Natemeyer, 1979). This also helps prevent painful beginnings. It can help transition to a new way of thinking by providing the correct amount of guidance to each individual staff member.

The second step in producing change is actual implementation. The principal's role is to provide an atmosphere based on

collaboration and professional inquiry (Leithwood, 1990). I will provide teachers the opportunity to share ideas, work together as a team, and develop strategies and materials that correlate with the particular change they are making in their classroom. Peer observations and visiting other school districts can provide a wealth of knowledge and a whole new perspective. These ideas were very beneficial to me when our staff was first introduced to whole language. By observing it first-hand, I could actually see the process in action. Principals can also promote available workshops and university coursework which provides for more needed knowledge.

As the principal, you can also recast routine administrative duties into powerful teacher development strategies (Leithwood, 1990). In my school, we went through a series of inservice activities dealing with cooperative learning. This time was formal with set lessons and goals. Along with these inservices, notes were put in our weekly bulletin, articles were run off for us to read, principal observations were made in each classroom, informal discussions were held in the hallways, etc., to further enhance cooperative learning into our daily repertoire of strategies used in the classroom. Every principal should take opportunities to focus on the change daily. This displays support for the change and provides for collegiality among the staff members.

The last step in producing change is institutionalization. This means the point at which we internalized the change and have embedded it in our style naturally. Several years ago, the Waterloo Schools provided its staff members with inservice training on effective teaching strategies. This year, with my student teacher, I noticed I was looking for effective strategies in her lesson presentations that I had learned from my own training. As I reflected on this change in my own attitude, I realized that this change did not occur within the actual inservice, but it took a long process of trial and error before I felt comfortable. Change does not occur overnight but needs to be nurtured constantly. Vogt and Walker (1987) term this step as refreezing. A monitoring system is set up to determine if the goals of the change are met. This is also part of the principal's role--to provide continued assistance and constant reinforcement long after the initial instruction. This step tends to be forgotten, but the principal can aid this last step by linking the change to instruction daily and removing obstacles which takes the focus of change away from the teacher. The principal also needs to analyze the change. Is it meeting the goals determined by the vision? Does the staff need to approach some things differently to bring the change back on course? No one has a better perspective of the school and what is going on in the classrooms than the principal.

I cannot leave the principal's role in producing change without touching upon humanism. The climate in which change will occur must be balanced with a measure of humanity. Fasenmyer (1984) feels you can set the tone for change by really listening to what your staff has to say and valuing their opinions, constant communication with staff members, encouraging initiatives and growth, creating and innovating untested ideas, using common sense and expertise of staff, being sensitive to teacher and student needs, and allowing autonomy in classrooms and freedom to develop style and versatility. In the class Seminar for Applications in the Field Setting, we listened to a principal, superintendent, and a board member review the roles they played in the school setting. A common thread which all three mentioned was the need to communicate and the willingness to listen. If either one of these broke down, the ability for each to play his/her role would be jeopardized. Listening and communicating play such an important part in the success of schools today!

The principal's commitment to quality needs to be shared with the community as well as internally. Everyone should be enlisted in this commitment and responsible for ownership. This creates a vital link between school and community and provides a bonding which can be beneficial to all involved.

Parent and Community Involvement in Education

We are in the position to prepare our students for life in a changing world (Tye, 1991). With the abundant curriculum changes needed to meet this preparation, our audience needs to be the community, as well as just students and faculty. "We are facing the deep structure of schooling--the shared values of society that determines what and how teaching and learning will occur" (Tye, 1991, p. 1).

The school community needs to be in on changes from the beginning. Parents should be involved in advisory committees, and goals of the school should be publicized through activities, events, hallways, newsletters, etc. "In other words, the goals should pervade the culture" (Snyder, 1988, p. 42).

I have had the experience of working in two totally different schools. The first setting was in a low socio-economic area. Parents had very little connection with the school. Honestly, I believe the effort was never made to involve them, and they stood in the background, apparently happy not to be involved. My second setting had a vast parent-volunteer network with concerns expressed honestly. Sitting at a staff meeting, the principal asked us what we felt was most crucial to effective education. A majority felt high expectations, orderly environment, etc., were most valued. Even though these are important, I was the only staff member who felt parent involvement and community relations

were the most critical. I still feel the same. The totally different experiences have shown me that the glaring omission in my first school was the lack of parental support. Such support is so vital to the overall achievement of each student in the school.

Lack of parental involvement often leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed. What is particularly frustrating is that parental participation is one clear, inexpensive way to improve schools. When parents are involved, children learn and retain more. Yet, too often, the educator's perception is that parents do not really care.

This perception may not be reality. Families have changed. Many children live in single-parent households. If the parent is working, time constraints prevent him/her from active participation in his/her child's education. This also occurs in two-parent families where both members work. I can appreciate their dilemma. Many times I have had to miss opportunities at my children's school because of work obligations. Other parents would like to help, but lack the basic skills themselves.

One of the problems facing educators today is giving more than lip service to advocating parental involvement. You must have a specific program to get such involvement (Meade, 1992). Targeting activities that occur in the evening hours as well as daytime may benefit parents' schedules. Offer suggestions that

can be done within the home setting. Be sensitive to parental needs as well as student needs.

In the Seminar for Administrative Applications in Field Settings, we discussed the fact that the key ingredient missing for students who did not experience success throughout school and later in life was lack of a vision. I accept this being the problem, but we need to explore the reasons. Why do these students not have a vision? Schools, parents, and community members have not tracked them along the way, giving them incentive and reasons for setting long-term goals. This is essential for today's students.

Parental involvement is not the only aspect of support. Because schools are an open-system, influenced by both internal and external factors, we need to view the community as a whole. Through positive public relations, the community can gain an appreciation of the enthusiasm, skill, and caring of our youth (Smith, 1990). It should be especially important to target our community members who do not have children in the public schools. In the days of educational cutbacks, a positive image portrayed by the schools can be instrumental in developing financial support. In Waterloo, we can see how negative publicity has hurt our support through the defeat of the instructional tax levy.

In addition to increasing community involvement in his/her schools, the educational leader must also take the time to reflect

upon the history of the school, its current conditions, and
envision the changes needed for the future.

Reflection on the Past, Present, and Future

The cultural noise in every school should be one of success
and celebration (Snyder, 1988). What a terrific thought! In
order to accomplish this, we need to decide where we have been in
the past, where we are in the present, and where we are going in
the future. We need time to reflect.

Schon (cited in Killon, J. P. & Todnem, G. R., 1991)
discusses three types of reflective practice: (a) reflection in
action (reflects on the problem rather than reacting impulsively),
(b) reflection on action (thinking critically about something
already done), and (c) reflection while in action (the principal
has an established professional routine and engages in critical
inquiry about other things).

One of the best ways to help me reflect is to keep a
professional journal. A year ago I was given the opportunity to
be in charge at my school for a week. It was a wonderful chance
for me to actually put into practice some of the ideas that I had
studied in classes. Every day I wrote about experiences I had—how
I had handled various situations and what I could have done
differently. Many of the daily routines were already in place,
and it gave me a chance to see if my style would call for changes
in these routines. I found that even small daily occurrences

still require thought before they occur. This also gave me a clearer perspective of what actually goes on in the office, in the classrooms, and at the school in general.

Throughout this paper, I have tried to reflect ideas about vision, including the values and beliefs of the community, and the abilities needed to change focus and direction toward the future. Educators also need to reflect on preconceptions relating to the purpose of schooling, and examine critically various perspectives and their relationship to education. "Critical reflection can aid us to examine particular context, content, and pedagogy within our schools and develop a rich repertoire of ideas, attitudes, and skills" (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1991, p. 43).

Bennis (1989) offers us the following three tests for reflective thinking to help us focus on a vision for education and how we can channel our thoughts toward productivity:

1. Know what you want, your abilities (what you do), and your capabilities (what you can do).

2. Know what drives you and gives you satisfaction, and know the difference between the two.

3. Know what your values and priorities are, know the values and priorities of the organization, and measure the difference between the two.

I see reflection as being a valuable personal tool for growth and a valuable communication tool with the staff. Through

reflection, I can target areas for personal growth. For example, I know one of my strengths is knowledge of curriculum, but I have never experienced the leadership to take an entire staff into the direction of the change that meets the vision. By reflecting in a journal ahead of time the steps I want to make along with a time line, I can at least get started in the right direction. As the plan unfolds, reflection can help me eliminate any problems that might arise and to develop alternatives when I try again. I am not afraid of a few failures along the way, particularly when I can determine what went wrong to improve on my style the next time.

Reflecting should also be part of on-going staff development or faculty meetings. Educators need time to either write about and/or discuss with fellow educators the ideas presented. Is it not strange that such time is very seldom set aside? This is something I feel is important enough to be included when staff is together. When change is expected, reflecting before the change is presented, during the process, and as an evaluative tool can help the staff members and administrator meet a common goal.

Summary

Change in the public schools is inevitable. How we accomplish this change can be predetermined with a vision for the future, a commitment to a quality school, an asserted effort to involve parents and community in education, and time to reflect.

The effective administrative leader will have many important roles to play and is crucial to educational reform.

As I reflected on these four critical areas that I felt were most crucial, I began to see ties between all of them. None of these areas stands alone. When the vision is collaboratively developed to fit the needs of your school, the changes that you should be making become apparent. Quality is of the utmost importance, and the time comes to reflect on what you see as changes for your vision to move into the future. School staff and community both should be involved in the decisions for quality change, and you can gather ideas from all different sources. Listen to what people are saying to you and make decisions as to what best fits the needs of the school.

Once the vision has a commitment from all involved, you need to decide what the specific changes should be and put a plan of action into place. Again reflection comes into play. Do not start without deciding first what is to be the best course of action. Who needs to be involved? How do you involve them? What will be your best instructional support system? What are your professional sources to rely upon? Where is your school functioning in the present, and what action needs to take place to move it into the future? All of these questions and many more need to be pondered before jumping into the change.

As change begins to take place, what are some ways to promote active participation by the community? Make sure they are fully aware of the direction the school is taking. They need ownership throughout the whole process. Observe the changes and reflect upon what is working and what still needs your direct supervision. Do you see teacher strengths that can be called upon to assist you when working with others? Are you comfortable with the way change is working in your school?

Reflection in the evaluative phase brings your thoughts back on focus with your vision. I think growth in your school would be an exciting prospect to observe. Share with your staff and the community all of the positive occurrences that are happening in your school. If the vision was shared initially, all involved will be able to relate to the growth with a type of ownership and commitment that will impact your whole school in the future. Would that not be a nice way to begin your administrative career?

Bennis (1989) feels the following five characteristics are key ingredients in the development of leadership.

1. Have a guiding vision. Have a clear idea of what is wanted both professionally and personally. If you were reading a map, determine where you will end up, and then choose the route which will be the most satisfying.

2. Have passion! Be able to focus on your inner voices and instinct. I feel passion and enthusiasm can infect everyone around you.

3. Have integrity! Know who you are and have the maturity to accept responsibility for actions and learn from others.

4. Be a person others can trust. This can only be earned through constancy, reliability, and integrity. Do what you say and follow through on commitments.

5. Be curious and daring! Take a risk and experiment. Reflect on your errors which involves processing your feelings, looking into the past, and learning from it.

All of the above ingredients are imperative sentences with the subject understood to be you. That is exactly how an administrator should view them. Look at the adjectives that make the statements come alive. Passion, integrity, trustworthy, curious, and daring all should be part of the educational leader's personality. With a plan for the future, commitment for a quality school from all involved, time to reflect on what is happening within the school, and personal traits which best attune to the needs of your school, your success rate will continue into the future.

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