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Reflections on secondary principalship: A reflective essay

Abstract
To be an educator is a difficult thing to define. To describe leadership would be an equally difficult task. So when one begins to entertain the notion of educational leadership or principalship, it is a struggle to develop a clear vision of what one would be doing if optimally engaged in the occupation. This paper attempts to clarify the uncertainty surrounding those tasks of educational leadership. Personal beliefs, philosophies, attitudes, knowledge and vision are developed and shared throughout this writing as various aspects or parts of principalship are examined.
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A Reflective Essay

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To be an educator is a difficult thing to define. To describe leadership would be an equally difficult task. So when one begins to entertain the notion of educational leadership or principalship, it is a struggle to develop a clear vision of what one would be doing if optimally engaged in the occupation.

This paper attempts to clarify the uncertainty surrounding those tasks of educational leadership. Personal beliefs, philosophies, attitudes, knowledge and vision are developed and shared throughout this writing as various aspects or parts of principalship are examined.

Motivation and Leadership

Principals must possess an understanding of the driving forces behind motivation as they begin leadership challenges. People are motivated to action by their basic human needs. Basic needs of teachers have been identified by Sergiovanni and Carver (1980). These needs include security, social acceptance, respect, autonomy and self-actualization. Human relation skills satisfy part of these needs, but leading an organization requires
Teachers are naturally motivated to fulfill basic needs. Administrative practices, contractual agreements and the school structure must allow for these needs to be met. If there is a perception that the organization or school blocks the fulfillment of these needs, individuals will be motivated to work against the organization. Administrators must remove obstacles to basic need fulfillment within a school.

Contractual negotiations and evaluations should be conducted so that staff members feel secure within the organization. Social functions should not have exclusive practices or elements. Respect and dignity should be modeled to all staff members at all times. A generous level of autonomy should be given to staff members in their particular area of expertise. Also, self-actualization opportunities such as professional growth opportunities, sabbaticals and reassignments or promotions should be available. These are a few examples of how principals may allow for the basic needs of
Respect and social acceptance are two of the basic needs which could logically motivate staff to move toward organizational goals. If acceptance means fitting into well defined roles of the organization and respect from co-workers results from individuals satisfying organization goals, fulfilling individual needs will lead to organizational success.

It is the role of the building principal to insure that a clear vision of the goals of the organization or school is shared by all so that staff members, in attempting to satisfy basic needs, move the school toward its vision. Without such a shared vision, staff members earning respect and gaining acceptance will most likely pull the organization in different and possibly undesirable directions.

Donald Reed (1990) suggested that administrative leadership is defined as the use of social control to move an organization toward a vision. That social control can be exerted through authority relationships or through the power of position.
Social control might be better understood as the channeling of motivation using relationships.

Gronn (1983) suggested that talk is the work of the principal. It is this communication which provides the foundation for authority relationships. Authority relationships can be charismatic in nature, traditionally or morally based, legally or rationally based, or can exist due to a perception of expertise (Reed, 1990).

Educational administrators develop relationships during communications with staff in four major settings (Reed 1990). These four situations include socializing, evaluating, managing and staff developing. Traditional-moral relationships typically occur during socializing and managing functions. Charismatic relationships typically develop during socializing and staff development functions. Expertise relationships usually develop in evaluation and staff development settings. Finally, legal-rational relationships usually develop in evaluation and management settings.
It would, therefore, seem most effective for capable administrators to engage in all four settings with staff members to maximize potential working relationships. Principals could most easily channel staff motives with a more diverse authority influence.

Social control utilizing the power of the position typically employs contractual, moral, psychological and technical resources (Reed 1990). The problem with using the power of the position in an autocratic manner is that subordinates lack the perception of being a part of the decision making group. In this case the basic need of autonomy is not being met and often the perception of respect suffers. Extensive autocratic decisions will result in minimal compliance on the part of the subordinates. If, in addition, the subordinates typically hold a differing position to mandates, sabotage against the organization or individual can be expected.

Using the power of the principal position as a means of social control should be used only when absolutely necessary
since it will, over time, work against the organization. When responding to critics, "Because I said so!" should not be a normative response.

Principals should choose to develop authority relationships rather than using the power of their position in working with staff. Sergiovanni (1990) referred to the development of authority relationships as bartering, building, bonding and banking. His view further implied that authority relationship development takes time and effort but is an investment which pays dividends in the long run.

Principals engage in many activities that effect individual staff members to varying degrees. They develop schedules, define committee functions, assign duties, select committee members, design staff development, engage in shared decision making, develop budget appropriations, institute bureaucratic procedures and conduct staff evaluations. It would follow that competent principals would not substantially interfere with basic teacher needs while engaging in these practices. It could
be further reasoned that purposefully framing these practices to insure basic human need fulfillment of staff members would provide the conditions for effective educational leadership.

Leaders do not generate motivation. Leaders artfully channel or reframe existing motivation. Basic needs provide the motivation for individual teachers within a school. Channeling the motives of staff using developed authority relationships toward the realization of an educational ideal is the essence of educational leadership.

Problem Solving:

Principals are looked to on a regular basis to solve problems and resolve conflict. Schon (1987) shared a model of problem solving called reflection-in-action. The key elements in this practice are identifying the uniqueness of the situation, locating previously experienced patterns within the situation, experimenting to transform the situation into a more acceptable one, and finally, analyzing encountered resistance to reframe the original problem if more transformation is needed. One of the
unique perceptions of this practice is that problems don't get solved but rather are moved to a more acceptable level.

Force field analysis is another problem solving practice. This technique may be used individually or in shared decision making. This practice examines the forces moving a situation toward a specific ideal and those forces pushing the situation toward the specific problem. The problem-solver then finds ways to accentuate the positive forces and reduce or eliminate the negative forces. This would then have the effect of moving the problem into a more acceptable situation.

Force field analysis works well with issues of divided interests. These problems with a high level of conflict will have easily identifiable forces at work. In these cases the analysis of the forces at work are paramount in arriving at an acceptable solution since they are the cause of the conflict.

Concensus building is another method of problem solving. It can be utilized in both small and large group settings. Concensus achievement is most successful for problem solving
when the situation is broad-based and not embroiled in conflict. Concensus development practices provide a channel for the basic needs of acceptance, respect, autonomy, and self-actualization to be realized.

There are various levels of concensus that can be reached with various levels of guaranteed minimal commitment for each. The problem with concensus techniques is that they typically take more time to finalize than traditional autocratic methods. Also, one person can significantly impede concensus achievement. The power of concensus building, however, is that with concensus comes commitment.

Vision and Direction

It stands to reason that groups of people must have unifying purpose to accomplish tasks as a whole. March (1965) specifically identified four purposes goals hold for an organization. Goals serve as a source of identification and commitment, guide action, provide justification and provide evaluation criteria. As stated previously, to insure that
individual basic needs of respect and acceptance are effectively realized, a clear vision of what the organization is trying to accomplish and what roles people play needs to be shared. These naturally motivated individuals need a unified direction for their actions so that the organization can move as a whole toward a predetermined ideal.

It is the responsibility of the educational leaders of a school to insure the development of a clear, shared organizational vision or mission. Morford (1989) found that organizations experienced improved productivity only when specific conditions existed within them. Organization members have to be deeply accultured to the mission of the organization. In addition, members of the organization had to experience real involvement in decisions that affected their lives and work.

Shared decision making utilizing consensus building should, therefore, be utilized on projects such as school mission and belief development and school improvement plan development. The power of consensus building is that shared
decisions produce a shared commitment to their realization. To implement school-wide improvement plans and begin to approach the vision of a school requires the efforts of all of its members. Though time consuming, consensus building is the best hope a school has to achieve a broad-based commitment to improvement.

School Governance

To be a leader in education requires that one understands its formal governance so that one may effectively work within it. That governance in America, though varied in particulars from state to state, can be outlined in the following general description.

It is the responsibility of the individual states in America to govern the educational process of their public. Most state constitutions have language charging their state legislature with the responsibility of establishing and maintaining a system of free public schools (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990, chap. 4). Although local school systems actually engage in
the educational process, state policies and decisions typically rule supreme in court decisions when local systems challenge state policies.

In an attempt to equalize education for all, the federal government intercedes in state education when there are inequities. This is most often done with federal grants for special education programs or target groups to be administered by the individual states. Through threat of federal money withdrawal, states can be persuaded to follow federal educational guidelines.

The court system in its interpretation of federal, state, and local laws can force school districts to make changes. Examples of changes would include policies related to personal freedoms, rights of access to a free and appropriate public education, and desegregation of attendance areas.

Organized interest groups can and do strongly influence state legislators' decisions concerning educational legislation. Teacher groups most strongly influence them on strictly
educational issues, whereas business, labor, and agricultural groups play a strong role in shaping legislation when educational issues become tax issues as well (Campbell et al., 1990, chap. 4). The state legislators are elected law-makers, so in that respect they are also influenced by general public opinion. In addition, they may influenced by a minority single issue group if well organized.

The executive branch of state government also has a hand in educational control. This group would include the governor, the chief state school officer, the state board of education, the staff of the department of education, and other state agencies.

The governor's control includes submitting budget recommendations to the legislature, delivering messages to the legislature and the public, the power to veto legislation, in most states appointing the state board of education, and in some states appointing the chief state school officer.

The chief state school officer has considerable influence over education. He or she can publicly express educational
needs, recommend action to the state board of education, influence legislatures considering educational changes, and in many states exercise general supervision over the schools of the state.

The state board of education, many times along with the state chief school officer, is charged with the general supervision of elementary and secondary schools in that state. Although most boards have a policy making function, in practice they mainly support the policy recommendations of the state chief school officer.

The department of education acts as a professional arm of the state board of education. They function as regulators of educational policy and are quite effective at enforcing minimum standards upon schools. Other specified state agencies have been established which would have jurisdiction over certain aspects of schools including such things as health and safety of pupils, auditing school funds, and offering state legal advice (Campbell et al., 1990, chap. 4).
The local school district is an instrument of the state to ensure the rights and privileges of free education to its citizens. The boards of education are policymaking bodies for a particular school district (Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, & Usdan, 1990, chap. 9).

School board members are agents of the state. They are chosen locally and derive their authority from the state. They have two major roles: boards reflect local public will and make critical internal management decisions. These responsibilities include allocation of fiscal resources, selection of administrative leadership, and analysis of their district's educational product.

Specific powers of school boards include building school buildings, hiring educators, determining which students go to which learning site, and enforcing compulsory education laws, to name a few (Campbell et al., 1990, chap. 9). With these powers come obligations. Boards must meet or exceed all local, state, and federal laws and regulations and abide by court decisions.
regarding their actions.

The intermediate unit of school administration functions to regulate and serve the needs of a block of school districts. The intermediate unit oversees compliance with state and federal regulations. Services usually include comprehensive programs and services for exceptional children, comprehensive educational media programs and services, curriculum subject matter consultant services, staff development activities, and vocational-technical programs.

The superintendent is the top administrative official of a school district. He or she can use appointments, assignments, promotions, and information development and control to direct a district. The most direct method of influence on education a superintendent may use, however, is the development and implementation of a district-wide strategic planning process for school improvement.

A school principal is a middle manager who is usually assigned the task of achieving optimal student learning and
environmental management within a particular school building. She or he is a representative of the superintendent of schools and is responsible to her or him. The principal must take care of day-to-day management of the school at the time the need arises. These timely needs include but is not limited to conflict management, changed scheduling arrangements, public relations needs, student discipline and rule enforcement, and supervision needs. Job descriptions of principals are heavily slanted toward managerial duties (Gorton & Schneider, 1991, chap. 11).

Educational leadership has been reported to be a top priority among principals concerning job responsibilities. However, as a result of time specific managerial duties, principals do not spend as much time on educational leadership as they should relative to its stated level of importance (Gorton & Schneider, 1991, chap. 11).

Educational leadership duties could include activities that either directly or indirectly effect instruction. Direct leadership might include curriculum development, staff
development of instructional practices, or teacher performance evaluations. Indirect educational leadership might include such things as teacher assignments, instructional time scheduling, or resource allocations. These indirect methods, which are also managerial tasks, may allow principals to more fully satisfy leadership needs without further time commitments. It is the responsibility of the principal to join the roles of manager and instructional leader (Campbell et al., 1990, chap. 11).

Teachers have a limited role in the formal organization and control of American education. However, as part of a national trend to decentralize authority, local school sites have received increased autonomy. Often coupled with that site authority is some form of shared decision making which includes teachers. In recent years teachers' roles have been growing from giving input to principals as a part of a committee, to shared decision making with administrators as part of a team. Some of these teacher/administrator teams are making decisions together on such things as educational program priorities and building
budgets for a particular school site. This increased teacher participation in school governance leads teachers to greater job satisfaction and higher morale (Gorton & Schneider, 1991, chap. 9).

Educational organizations are not as coordinated by a governance hierarchy at the school site level as administrators would have one believe. Weick (1976) described educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. That is, most elements within a particular organization are not extensively dependent on the other elements. The parts of the school are mostly autonomous due to relative lack of coordination, multiple successful methodologies, relative absence of regulations, infrequent inspection, and the delegation of discretion (Weick, 1976).

Weick (1976) determined several advantages to loose coupling including independent adaptation to unique settings, increased tolerance to diversity, many independent sensing elements, the isolation of problems, greater opportunity for self
determination, and finally, less expense than a tightly coupled system. Coordination costs time and money. The disadvantage is that the organization as a whole is slow to change due to a lack of central control and direction.

The lack of hierarchical control in schools is balanced by authority relationships between principals and staffs. Gronn (1983) described the work of a principal as the talk that he or she does moving in and out of relationships and encounters anywhere throughout the school site and beyond.

It is up to principals to bring out central unity or shared vision in this system inherently lacking in it. With this shared vision schools are more capable of change and improvement (Reed, 1990). The frequent maintenance required of vision in a loosely coupled system is accomplished by principals through the timely influence they exert when they engage with staff.

Technological Advancement

Technological Advancements and purchasing in schools is occurring at a rapid rate. Between 1981 and 1987 school
purchases of computers and video disc players increased at a rate of 11% per year (Fisher, 1992). Schools that choose to wait will fall dramatically behind in a brief time.

Purchasing technologies is only part of the answer to improving instruction. While most teachers indicated they would like computers in their classrooms few felt they had the training to utilize them effectively (Fisher, 1992). Most computer uses in classrooms thus far has been isolated drill and practice. In addition, the current quality of educational software could be better and need thorough screening before purchase.

The real power of technologies in the future of education lie in its ability to interact with people (Dede, 1989). Coupled with interaction is its barrier breaking ability. Time barriers, space barriers, communication barriers, information barriers, and safety barriers, which limit current educational interactions will no longer hold back students of the future.

The role of the educational leaders in this technological
venture should be the institutionalization of a workable district technology plan. The plan would typically be comprised of at least four phases which include a technological awareness/update for staff, formation of a technology committee, implementation of a technology committee plan, and finally, an evaluation of the technology plan to better meet educational needs.

There are several important characteristics of good technology plans. It is important that staff inservice training be a hands-on experience for every participant (Lambert, 1989). The technology committee should logically be a district-wide group to insure that unnecessary duplication of equipment or resources does not occur. Revenue resources need to be determined keeping in mind that software and staff training will probably consume a substantial portion of the technology budget. And finally, the creation of incentives would help motivate staff to become involved.
School Improvement Model

Though school improvement models differ in specifics there are several key components that can be found (National Study of School Evaluation [NSSE], 1992). Before planning can begin data will need to be gathered to develop a student and community profile so that specific needs can later be addressed.

The next part of an improvement model is the development of a set of shared beliefs about learning and teaching practices. Representatives from the educational community can be directed through consensus building techniques. Further consensus can then occur to take this set of shared beliefs along with gathered data and agree on a shared mission or vision of what the school ought to be. These beliefs and mission statement should be revisited regularly as they are the vision of what the school is trying to achieve.

Using the beliefs and mission of the school, desired learner outcomes can then be developed which depict the knowledge, skills, and values that the educational community agree students
should have when they leave the school. Desired learner outcomes should be measurable.

All organizational practices and instructional practices should be designed to promote the achievement of desired learner outcomes. Practices can be analysed at this time to determine areas of strength and areas for improvement in meeting learner outcomes. Student performance data should also be analysed to determine areas of strength and weakness relative to learner outcomes.

Once strengths and areas for improvement have been identified in student performance, organizational practices, and instructional practices; two to three items may be selected from each evaluation to become a targeted area for school improvement (NSSE, 1992). Concensus building should occur school-wide to identify the final targeted area that will become a part of a two to three year school improvement plan. Included within the plan are strategies to meet the goal, a time table, a resource committment, persons responsible, and a means of
evaluation.

This school improvement model contains the curriculum development and evaluation process. Any school improvement planning process should be institutionalized as part of a regular occurring cycle to ensure a continuing commitment to its success.

Supervision and Evaluation

While it is true that evaluation is to be used with remediation to dismiss the incompetent, that purpose merely scratches the surface of the power of evaluation. The greatest power of evaluation is not from judgment passed during summation, but of growth and development during formation of the teaching act.

Evaluation is more of a guided professional sharing between supervisor and teacher in which the teacher gains ownership of the professional growth he or she is to engage in. The skilled supervisor never stops teaching as he or she stretches the staff so that they flourish, ever if greatly
experienced.

This evaluation tool only becomes powerful if the prevailing attitude is that its intent is to catch teachers doing things right, not wrong (Manning, 1988, chap. 1). To get growth from an individual, supervisors need to work from the teacher's strengths which will gain trust and a positive professional relationship. Only then will one be able to work with a professional effectively to help him or her grow.

Formative evaluation is another important component to the power of evaluation. A supervisor has to work with the teacher in the teaching endeavor, sharing possible strategies, acknowledging success, suggesting potential solutions and encouraging examination of alternative strategies. Without this groundwork with the teacher, supervisors will not have developed the trust necessary to foster meaningful growth (Manning, 1988, chap. 1).

When educators make professional growth commitments, the true power of evaluation has been realized. With no
surprises, due to formative evaluation, summative evaluation leads teachers directly into self-determined, supervisor approved, commitment to professional expansion and enhancement. It is critical that supervisors help teachers on this endeavor through active interest to be sure educators internalize the importance of this life long learning and growing.

Evaluation is an important tool for principals to be more than building managers. It is one means for principals to realize their role as educational leaders and to help shape a school into the growing, learning community of their vision.
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