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## A vision for elementary schools: A reflective essay

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## A vision for elementary schools: A reflective essay

### Abstract

Upon graduation in 1973 from Iowa State University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Child Development and certification in Early Childhood Education, I was very certain that I wanted to teach kindergarten in the public school. This strong desire to teach in the public schools was rooted in my belief that the public school was the institution best suited to provide for the educational needs of young children. Student teaching both in the private sector and the public school had strengthened this belief. With a degree in child development, I had a solid background in not only the art of teaching young children but also the science of how young children develop and learn. As I entered the public school system in the fall of 1973, I soon discovered that most of my colleagues were trained in elementary education and possessed a very different philosophy about teaching young children.

A VISION FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

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by

Kathleen M. Erusha

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Upon graduation in 1973 from Iowa State University with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Child Development and certification in Early Childhood Education, I was very certain that I wanted to teach kindergarten in the public school. This strong desire to teach in the public schools was rooted in my belief that the public school was the institution best suited to provide for the educational needs of young children. Student teaching both in the private sector and the public school had strengthened this belief.

With a degree in child development, I had a solid background in not only the art of teaching young children but also the science of how young children develop and learn. As I entered the public school system in the fall of 1973, I soon discovered that most of my colleagues were trained in elementary education and possessed a very different philosophy about teaching young children.

While I made decisions about classroom practices based on the age and stage of development of the children I was

teaching, I felt that my colleagues, who were competent and caring individuals whom I respected, placed a greater emphasis on the curriculum they were required to teach and based instruction solely on the content of the curriculum. This was often done with little regard for how young children learn. The atmosphere in their classrooms reflected this belief and I felt young children were being rushed through the content areas without close attention to their developmental needs. As a result of this difference, I was strongly compelled to share my beliefs about how young children develop and learn and the implications for classroom practice. Accepting this challenge placed me in a leadership position early in my career and provided numerous opportunities throughout the next 20 years to strongly influence curriculum and instruction for young children in my school district. These experiences along with many others have helped to shape my vision of a quality school. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on these experiences, share my vision of a quality elementary school

and define my personal professional vision for administrative practice.

### Core Beliefs

I started teaching with the belief that all children can learn and succeed and that it was my responsibility as a teacher to establish a learning environment in which this could occur. I believed that this environment needed to reflect the developmental nature of my children. While I was responsible for the children in my classroom I also believed I had a responsibility to their parents not only to provide for their child's education but to also involve parents in this process and I valued parents as their child's first teacher. As a young teacher I worked diligently to teach and learn as much as possible in order to create the best learning environment for my students and their families.

This task was not always easy and I spent most of my time working with children and families who were at-risk. I learned to appreciate the little successes and to understand and

believe that most parents want what is best for their children. It was very important for me to be sensitive to the needs of both the children and their families that I worked with and I learned to trust and respect them as individuals.

I often felt as if I was not only wearing the hat of a teacher but also a social worker. I felt less equipped to fulfill the role of a social worker and relied heavily on the social worker and support staff in the buildings in which I worked. The principal was an important player in this group and it was essential to keep the lines of communication open between and among these key people. I felt that in those early years we all worked as a team and learned and taught each other a tremendous amount. Those thoughts and experiences have stayed with me and have helped shape my vision of a good school.

I left the classroom after 18 years of teaching and accepted a position as a program facilitator for my district. While this position took me away from daily contact with

students, teachers and parents in an elementary building, it put me in close contact with educational leaders in the central office and provided me with the opportunity to engage in daily dialogue about educational issues that were only occasionally discussed at the building level. I also became more heavily involved in staff development and curriculum issues working closely with teachers, principals and administrators at both the building and district level. During this time I decided to start coursework in educational administration with the hope of someday becoming an elementary principal. As I enter this next phase of my professional career my personal vision of a good school includes the following dimensions.

#### All Children Can Learn

Today I continue to believe that all children can learn and succeed and that it is the collective responsibility of the school community to ensure that this happens. The belief that all children can learn has been influenced by personal experience as a classroom teacher and through the study of the

work of Jean Piaget. In Piaget's early studies of infants, (Ginsburg and Opper 1969) he concluded that learning is an interactive, gradual, continuous process and is the manifestation of the infant perceiving and interacting with the environment. While he also recognizes the role of maturation in intellectual development, Piaget emphasizes the importance of a rich and stimulating environment for optimal learning. Therefore, he is considered an interactionist who believes that "intellectual development results from an interplay between internal and external factors"(Ginsburg and Opper 1969 p. 70).

Piaget's work extended beyond the stage of infancy and his later studies have provided insight into child development through adolescence. Through the study of these works, I have formed my belief that while children come to school with some limitations due to internal factors beyond my control, I can influence student learning by establishing a rich, stimulating and engaging learning environment for all children.

As Piaget's theories of development have been widely

translated, explored and accepted, establishing the appropriate learning environment for all children has become increasingly more difficult over the last 20 years due to a more diverse society, the global economy, the increase in children and families at-risk and the increased societal demands on the educational system. Hodgkinson (1991) reports that "at least one-third of the nation's children are at risk of school failure even before they enter kindergarten" (p. 10). Poverty is a major contributor to this at risk factor. He reports that "about one-third of preschool children are destined for school failure because of poverty, neglect, sickness, handicapping conditions and lack of adult protection and nurturance" (p. 10). As a result, schools today are being challenged to provide a multitude of services to address the factors which place children at risk. The demands that this places on the educational system requires all members of the school community to join in this effort to provide the optimal learning environment for it's members. Boyer (1987) suggests that

"educators must develop programs that confront issues of poverty, health, and families" (p. 4).

I believe that the primary purpose of education still remains to enable each individual to eventually care for themselves and others despite the increasing difficulty of this pursuit. Effective schools accomplish this task by creating a learning environment for the entire school community. This learning environment expands beyond the academic arena and embraces all members of the school community.

### The Learning Environment

I believe that effective schools are learning environments for everyone in the school including students, teachers, parents and the principal. Barth (1990) describes an effective school as a "community of learners" and suggests that a good school "is a place in which everyone is teaching and everyone is learning" (p. 513).

Essential for establishing this learning environment is an understanding and sensitivity to the needs of each learner.

Everyone shares this responsibility and is continually learning through actively fostering, developing and participating in the learning environment. Barth (1990) contends that the act of learning is far more important than what is being learned. As learners view others learning they share in this endeavor and thus enhance their own learning and that of the entire community. Viewing teachers and parents as well as students as learners requires strong leadership and modeling of this process.

The principal is in a position to orchestrate this effort but allows and encourages other individuals within the organization to share this responsibility. I believe that this occurs when the principal provides the opportunity and encourages teachers to assume the responsibility of creating a shared vision and purpose. Senge (1990) suggests that creating a vision is an ongoing and essential process for real learning to occur in any organization and that it is through this process that "people are continually expanding their capabilities to

shape their future" (p. 9).

I have experienced the power in taking the time to develop a shared vision while working with several curriculum committees on curriculum revisions during the last three years. As I reflect back on the initial meetings of each committee, I realize the tremendous amount of time that the members of the committee spent on creating a shared vision. This process was often slow and required each member of the committee to reflect and define their own personal vision by engaging in dialogue about their thinking before creating a shared vision. This process could not be hurried and each individual needed to be supported in this risk taking. Once the shared vision emerged and was clarified, the task of revising the curriculum was simplified because each decision was collectively held to the standard of the shared vision.

These were leadership opportunities from which I developed a strong belief in the process of creating a shared vision. I realized that as a leader I had a vision but it was

extremely important to allow time for others to strengthen and help shape this vision. Covey (1989) describes effective leaders as those who value the relationship with others and recognize the strength in this relationship. He suggests "A person who is truly effective...recognizes his own perceptual limitations and appreciates the rich resources available through interaction with the hearts and minds of other human beings" (p. 277). Through this process all members of the school community are engaged in continuous learning. As teachers clearly define their purpose and learn from each other, this learning directly influences the learning of the entire school community.

Effective principals create learning environments by being efficient managers and instructional leaders. Bracey, Rosenblum, Sanford and Trueblood (1990) encourage leaders to recognize the importance of understanding that everyone has something to contribute and to acknowledge that through valuing each individual's contribution and supporting them in

their efforts, they begin to believe in themselves and become productive and contributing members of the organization. Thus, through the principal's leadership the entire school community is enriched and becomes an effective institution which ultimately benefits society.

### Managers And Instructional Leaders

I believe that effective principals are efficient managers and instructional leaders who are visible, child centered, visionary, well organized, and current on important issues.

They delegate responsibilities appropriately, allow others to lead, build consensus and possess a positive disposition and a desire to continuously improve. They respect each individual and their contribution to the learning environment.

Relationships are important to effective leaders and through these positive relationships they inspire others to succeed and seek improvement. NAESP (1991) concurs with these characteristics of proficient principals and suggests that "where you find an outstanding school you will find an outstanding

principal" (p. 5). I believe these qualities are essential for effective educational leaders to manage and lead schools into the 21st century and beyond. With changing demographics this task is not an easy one and it has significant implications for administrative practice.

Changing demographics have placed an increasing number of children at risk for school failure. Half of the American labor force are women, 40% of children come from single-parent households and 25% of all children live in poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 1992). Traditional support systems that fulfilled the needs of children are being stressed and schools are being challenged to assume a greater responsibility in providing for the needs of children and their families. NASBE (1989) recommends that schools establish collaborative relationships with human service agencies. This requires "becoming familiar with existing services, demonstrating a willingness to forge new relationships, joining community planning councils and coalitions and lending

support and leadership in advocacy efforts to increase and improve child and family services" (p. 30). Educational leaders in today's schools are facing this challenge and this directly impacts their role as managers and instructional leaders.

Cunard (1990) reports that this requires a new organizational structure which encourages teachers to assume a leadership position. He provides several strategies to achieve shared leadership including peer coaching and sharing staff development responsibilities. Given this organizational structure, the principal is given the opportunity to engage in "visionary leadership" (p. 22). Creating schools to meet the needs of a diverse society is part of this visionary thinking.

While schools continue to be the institution which provides educational services, today they are expanding into the human service arena. This is new territory for many schools and directly impacts the role that schools play in society.

The constitution of the United States guarantees a free

public education for its citizens. Historically, this guarantee was based on the belief that the progress of our country was dependent on the education of its citizens. This continues to be the case today. However, in order for the educational system to accomplish this task it needs to adapt to meet the needs of a diverse society. Young & Rubicam (1991) suggest that

the answer lies with reinventing the definition of a school and making it the one institution in a child's life—the place that *guarantees* that children receive the physical and emotional support that is essential to their learning and development. (p. 11).

The future of our nation continues to rest on the educational system and principals through effective leadership play a key role in designing this system which recognizes the total needs of the individual.

#### Schools As Family Resource Centers

I believe that school can be "the place that *guarantees* that children receive the physical and emotional support that is

essential to their learning and development" (Young & Rubicam, 1991, p. 10). Thus, my vision of a quality school includes school as the center of the community providing for the basic needs of children and their families. Because children bring more than educational needs into the classroom, schools need to be equipped to address those needs.

My vision includes schools as family resource centers where children and their families receive a quality education coupled with the human services that are needed to maintain a quality life. Schools as family resource centers have at their core the best interest of children and their families.

While the primary goal of the elementary school remains the education of the school community, schools expand into the human service arena providing preschool education, child care, parent education opportunities, health services and resource and referral for families. These programs become integrated with the existing educational components in the school. Schools of this nature are flexible and respond to the unique

characteristics of the community they serve. They become the locus of support for children and their families, addressing both educational and non-educational needs. Schools as family resource centers are noisy, exuberant, alive and inviting. They are places where children, teachers and parents want to be. Collaboration between students, teachers and parents is at the heart of this school community.

These schools require a new climate and the leadership of a principal who is responsive to individual needs, builds a climate of mutual respect and understanding, engages in shared decision making and constantly seeks to clarify and achieve the vision of an effective school.

### Conclusion

I have described the dimensions of my personal vision of a good school and identified those experiences and values that have helped to shape this vision. Through this process I have recognized that while the principalship is a single role, it is essential for effective leaders to engage in collaborative efforts

with the entire school community in order to provide the best education that everyone is entitled to.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for me as a principal will be to continually live out the core values which I have described and to consistently determine my actions based on these values. Covey (1989) suggests that we must learn to say yes to those activities that promote our personal vision and no to the others. I believe that developing this habit will be essential and that I will continually need to reflect on the question "What is it to educate" (Green, 1987, p. 109)? By continually clarifying my purpose I believe that I will practice those behaviors that recognize the important role that education plays in developing the dignity of every individual.

As I begin the principalship I will take with me these beliefs, values and those experiences which will help to create a quality learning environment for the students, teachers and parents whom I have the opportunity to work with and learn from. I know that it will be important for me to manage

effectively the various aspects of the principalship but I am hopeful that through constant reflection I will use my leadership skills to engage in what is important and of greatest value. Listening to the voices of my heart and making decisions based on clearly defined goals and values will be a constant challenge and one which I will readily accept.

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