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A vision for leadership in the elementary school: A reflective essay

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A vision for leadership in the elementary school: A reflective essay

Abstract

As I sat anxiously waiting for the interview with the personnel director, I found my mind going through a mental checklist. I had carefully selected a navy blue "power suit" that was simple, yet professional. My hair, nails and make-up were done with discretion. The jewelry I had selected complimented the suit. I definitely emulated the "look" of a professional. But the "look" wasn't nearly as important as the values that I believed so strongly in—the values that brought me here.

A VISION FOR LEADERSHIP IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Margaret (Peg) L. Frey

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As I sat anxiously waiting for the interview with the personnel director, I found my mind going through a mental checklist. I had carefully selected a navy blue "power suit" that was simple, yet professional. My hair, nails and make-up were done with discretion. The jewelry I had selected complimented the suit. I definitely emulated the "look" of a professional. But the "look" wasn't nearly as important as the values that I believed so strongly in--the values that brought me here.

I was raised in an alcoholic, dysfunctional home where education was not a priority. I don't remember my parents going to any school functions or conferences. After leaving home at age 18, I vowed I would consciously think of how my parents viewed the world and do a 180 degree turn. Through the help of a loving husband deeply rooted in family values, I began to experience life as I had seen it on "Leave It To Beaver."

My value toward learning began to emerge as I became actively involved in our children's education. I volunteered many hours at our neighborhood school and I soon discovered how much I loved this atmosphere. The children were full of questions and wonder. Even watching an ant farm had new meaning for me. I was seeing the world through young inquisitive eyes!

While working with the kindergarten PEP Program, our younger son's teacher asked if I had thought about entering the field of education as a career. That had never crossed my mind before, but the seed was then planted. Having been away from formal education nearly 10 years, I was understandably apprehensive about pursuing a degree. Nonetheless a strong desire to be a part of education provided the push I needed.

From that point on, my life was filled with college classrooms while I still maintained my position as a room mother for both boys. At times, learning was very difficult for me. Often I did not do as well as I would have liked in a classroom with a straight lecture format. However, if the lecture was coupled with discussion and experiences, I learned so much more. Accordingly, when I became an elementary teacher, my belief in the way children learn emerged largely from my own experiences as a learner.

Attitude Toward Learning

I truly believe all children can learn, although under varied experiences. Children process information differently and consequently, teaching styles need to be modified to accommodate all learners in the classroom. A child's underachievement or unresponsiveness could be the result of his or her own learning style being neglected.

Bernice McCarthy has developed an inventory based on research done by David Colb (McCarthy, 1985) that shows four main learning styles. Type one learners are classified as divergers. "They perceive information concretely and process it reflectively. They integrate experience with the self. They learn by listening and sharing ideas" (p. 3). These children do very well in a cooperative learning environment.

Type two learners are assimilators and "perceive information abstractly and process it reflectively.... They value sequential thinking and need details.... They enjoy traditional classrooms" (McCarthy, 1985, p. 4). Children such as these are likely to become our mathematicians and scientists as they enjoy analyzing data.

The third type is classified as a convergent thinker. "Type three learners perceive information abstractly and process it actively....They integrate theory and practice and learn by testing theories and applying common sense....They are skills oriented" (McCarthy, 1985, p. 5). Hands-on activities are very well suited for these children.

The fourth type is known as accommodators. They are learners who "perceive information concretely, and process it actively....They integrate experience and application, learn by trial and error, and are believers

of self-discovery" (McCarthy, 1985, p. 6). These learners are very vocal in the classroom and enjoy a room that accommodates change.

The implication for classroom teachers is that not all students learn as they do; therefore, lessons need to accommodate varying learning styles. However, as a teacher, I find teaching to the learning styles is not always enough. Both behavior disruptive and learning disabled students are mainstreamed into my classroom. It is my responsibility to teach them science during a 45 minute block each day. More importantly, it is my obligation to meet each one of their educational needs. That must always be remembered as a teacher; it can never be forgotten as an administrator.

From colleagues I learned strategies that facilitated learning for both these special needs children and, at the same time, the wide spectrum of other children in my class. At first I felt like a juggler on a tight rope, but after time and with lots of help and support, I was meeting the needs of my class and witnessing success.

Through collegial expertise, I became a better teacher. But perhaps the greatest lessons of all were learned from the children themselves, and the realization that before we reach into their minds, we need to touch their heart and soul. Adam, a cerebral

palsy child without the use of his right arm, taught me to modify equipment. Ryan, a very limited reader, compelled me to develop alternate testing instruments. Amber, an extremely bright but bored child, challenged me to motivate and enrich her. These children and others like them, forced me to use a variety of teaching styles in order to facilitate greater gains in student performance.

Learning promotes success, and as children experience success, they develop a sense of self-worth. When children feel good about themselves, they are better able to feel good about others. Those feelings then allow children to let down their defenses and begin to trust and respect those around them. It is on that foundation the building of minds productively begins.

Trust and Respect

Personally, a sense of trust and respect were two qualities I learned late in life. I was programmed to look out for myself. I didn't respect my parents and I certainly had no respect for myself. Through patience and endurance, my husband taught me to trust and respect him and--more importantly--to trust and respect myself. I had never known anyone like him. I wanted our children to live in a home where these qualities were nurtured. Additionally, I recognized the value for

me to be able to exemplify these qualities to my students.

These values need to be cultivated within the walls of the school as well. Sometimes, a classroom will provide a child's only exposure to trust and respect. The first thing I tell my students in the fall is that I will never yell at them or tell them to "shut up." Misbehavior will be dealt with in private and the students are to hold me accountable. My room needs to become a safe environment where student dignity is vital.

As an administrator I want to get the message out that trust and respect need to be modeled by all. My students were constantly "sizing up" the atmosphere around them. Students need to see adults treating each other appropriately. They also must experience other learning situations where these behaviors are demonstrated throughout the school. When students feel safe and respect is projected, a positive relationship begins to evolve.

I don't ever want to lose touch with the fact that today's children are the hope of our future. They represent the future, and if we do not respect and trust them today, we fail to teach future leaders to be trusting and respectful. Trust and respect are two requirements on which relationships are built.

Relationships

At a conference in Washington D.C., psychiatrist Robert Coles (cited in Scherer, 1993) was quoted as saying, "Let us try to impact our children not only with factuality but a perspective of how important it is to know and understand others, reach out, to put yourself in other's shoes, walk as they walk, and feel their pain. That is our challenge" (p. 3).

In reflection my student teaching experience had that impact on me. I had worked very closely with this mentor-teacher when I was a room mother. She was a favorite teacher of both of our boys, and I could understand why. Her relationship with her students was a priority. I don't remember ever developing a relationship with a teacher. This was new to me, and I wanted to know more!

She dignified each child through encouraging their strengths and building their weaknesses. Group building activities became an exciting daily ritual. Teachable moments were utilized whether the situation happened on the playground, in the hallway, or in the classroom. Students developed a strong relationship with her, as well as with each other. Many of the relationships that began in that classroom became life long. I knew this was how I wanted my classroom to be.

Later, with a degree in hand, I diligently sought employment. I was issued a temporary contract as a kindergarten teacher in our neighborhood school working next door to the "sower of the seed." I learned so much through this professional relationship and the many others who have since become my exemplary teaching mentors. This encouraged me to work extremely hard to make the staff and community view me as an asset and effective teacher.

I was then hired to work in a school that had a high ratio of African-American children and a high percentage of low socioeconomic students. My paradigms were severely tested, but I soon became colorblind and began teaching students and building relationships.

The administrator who hired me was a great source of encouragement. He was concerned that I develop professionally and receive the support that a beginning teacher desperately needs. Through the coaxing of the principal, two colleagues took me under their wings and developed what they perceived as a "greenhorn." Through those relationships and from that time on, my professionalism has been under constant refinement.

I consider it a very important undertaking to encourage positive and healthy relationships, whether with students or peers. My colleagues have become confidants who keep me growing both personally and

professionally. I am developing a repertoire of core values which is founded upon a view of teachers as leaders. Many of my colleagues are involved in key school functions. Gradually, as I became involved in committees and even chaired several of them, my leadership qualities emerged and personal confidence followed. I cannot ignore the tremendous power of relationships.

This power of relationships is something I hope to nurture as a principal. In a recent graduate class, it was clearly pointed out that as an administrator, you are given only as much power in a leadership role as your staff will allow you to have. Through the building of relationships, leadership is allowed.

Leadership

"Leadership is the process of bringing forth the best from oneself and others" (Wilson, 1993, p. 25). When we think of leadership within the educational setting, we naturally think of the building administrator; however, leadership cannot be limited to that position. Teachers are also leaders and need to be viewed as such.

"Leaders challenge the process because they are risk-takers who capitalize on opportunities. As idealists who communicate expressively, they inspire a shared vision. Since they like teamwork

and instinctively nurture the talent and energy of colleagues, leaders enable others to act. Leaders are role-models and planners who model the way. By serving as coaches and cheerleaders, they encourage the heart." (Wilson, 1993, p. 24)

Within their classrooms, teachers have an enormous power to bring forth the best from students and others. They motivate students from a wide range of backgrounds. They challenge students to stretch their potential and view the world from a new perspective. They make curricular and instructional decisions based on the needs of their students. They should be a resource and an advocate for fellow colleagues.

If teachers are leaders, then, administrators must become leaders of leaders. How an administrator leads or acts as a change agent depends on many factors, most of them affective. A good leader must know the individuals he or she leads. An administrator could be the most intellectual person within that building and full of creative ideas, but if he or she doesn't have credibility based on mutual trust and respect, the ideas go out the window. Poor internal relationships can have an adverse effect on even the best of educators. School leadership must perpetuate an atmosphere of openness and fairness.

My second principal was an ex-marine. He ruled by an iron fist. Decisions were made at the top and trickled down. His implementation of ideas was through threats or promises of a positive evaluation instrument. Often, if a teacher had an approach or strategy he/she felt would benefit the students, somehow it had to appear to be the principal's idea or it would not be given the chance to make a difference. As teachers we learned to either play along or be excluded. Although our district would never endorse this extreme management style, we were reminded that administrators in the central office had chosen him as our leader and we were deemed his subordinates.

Teacher interviews conducted by Stimson and Appelbaum (1988) revealed that:

Satisfied teachers believed that their principal cared about their opinions and responded to their concerns. Principals who took the time to build coalitions--to plant ideas with key teachers then slowly build support--were among the most effective in influencing change in their schools. (p. 315)

In addition, leading a school also involves consistency, especially in dealing with classroom management. A consistent and systematic discipline plan needs to be implemented school wide. It has been the traditional thought that dealing with discipline is the

administrator's job; however, research has shown it is most effective when dealt with immediately and by the classroom teacher. They will need the support of the administrator. Canter (1989) says:

Without an administrator backing the teacher's efforts to improve behavior management, without an administrator to coach and clinically supervise a teacher's behavior management skills, that teacher is not going to receive the necessary feedback and assistance to master those skills. (p. 60)

One way to provide such support is for the principal, teachers, and other staff members to participate in the development of a systematic discipline plan for their school. As a part of this planning, they should develop strategies for consistent management of student discipline.

It is vital for classroom teachers to have a systematic discipline plan that explains exactly what will happen when students choose to misbehave. By telling the students at the beginning of the school year what the consequences will be, teachers insure that all students know what to expect in the classroom. Without a plan, teachers must choose an appropriate consequence at the moment when a student misbehaves. (Canter, 1989, p. 58)

Schools are full of leaders. There needs to be encouragement within the school to develop collegial sharing and tap into one of the most productive and practical ways of gaining new insights for effective teaching. Through that pool of expertise and leadership, all children learn! With coalitions come a commitment of a shared vision. When teachers are treated as professionals, and their expertise is utilized and trusted, "mountains will move!"

Shared Vision

My vision is something that I have checked at the eye doctor every three years; it is never checked in an educational setting. I was first introduced to the term shared vision during the course Introduction to Educational Administration. We were asked to think about our personal vision toward teaching and leadership. This opened a whole new dimension for me. Fullan (1993) suggests:

Personal vision comes from within. It gives meaning to work, and it exists independently of the organization or group we happen to be in. Once it gets going, it is not as private as it sounds. Especially in moral occupations like teaching, the more one takes the risk to express personal purpose, the more kindred spirits one will find.
(p. 13)

Equally important, when a staff begins to share a common vision, the focus will naturally become that of educating children. It allows for an open atmosphere where a shared vision can emerge. The shared vision then becomes the driving force of the instructional program and defines the expectations and direction for a clear sense of what is possible and how it might be achieved. Still, shared vision needs to be under continual realignment as the conditions and needs of the students change. True vision results from involvement. As an administrator I will need to create numerous opportunities for these open forums to occur and invite involvement that motivates the school and community to reach another step towards attaining the greatest hope for the future--opportunity for our children. When the school doors open, we need to be ready with a staff that shares a common vision of what the school program can and will accomplish. Time is precious!

In a recent videotape, Joel Barker (1990) states, "Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision passes the time. Vision with action can change the world." But vision should not be confined to the limits of the school.

School-Community Partnerships

By utilizing the community, we enrich our students with a variety of experiences and we bridge the gap that

exists between the two. This concept of community involvement led me into one of the most exciting and rewarding areas of teaching.

The Partners in Education began as a pilot in my classroom. We were partnered with a local energy company. After hours of planning, Iowa Public Service brought in an electrical diorama that helped the children learn about safety. From there many of the employees worked in the science labs with my inquisitive fifth graders. During these labs the students constructed working parallel and series circuitry. This truly motivated my students and me! Our partnership in science led to a similar involvement in literature, which spread into other subject areas and finally to all of the other rooms in the school. That partnership became a dynamic teaching tool and support for me!

Schools are open systems where relationships outside the physical walls need to be cultivated. The school and community partnership helps bring classroom learning into a practical focus for students. There are unlimited human resources available that can be tapped and enhance even the best educational program. The benefits are four-fold:

- 1) The children see a reason for their learning. Connections are made between classroom learning and career choices.

2) The community feels the satisfaction of helping children. Not all were meant to be teachers, but for a class period or two, the guest is in the spotlight and the children are enthralled. From brick layers to bankers, once classroom volunteers have shared themselves, the children won't forget those familiar faces. Of all the community people I have had in my classroom, not one has left with a negative feeling about the school and many have returned because of the sincere reception.

3) The community person learns first hand the needs of the school. School levies don't pass because people think the school is doing just fine without the extra money. By creating a strong school and community relationship, the educational needs are made public. Community people then act as a catalyst to put dreams into realities.

4) Teachers receive outside help. Often times, teachers feel alone in the classroom where no one in the outside world knows what it is like to teach without needed supplies. Through partnerships a support system is built for the teachers and the rest of the school.

Responsibility lies on the shoulders of the building administrator to develop positive relations between the school and community. With the support of

the community and the talents within it, everyone benefits.

Students tend to perform better in schools that have more people supporting their learning. Parents know more about what is going on at school, have more opportunities to communicate with their children's teacher, and are able to help their children increase their learning. Teachers gain a partner in education. Teachers learn more about their students through their parent and community contacts and are able to use that information to help increase their student's performance. (Banks & Banks, 1993, pp. 348-349)

With a staff that is united in vision and has positive business support, we can be prepared when the children arrive that first day. I will shape and preserve the integrity of our school under the scrutiny of parents who entrust their children to our care. I must let them know how difficult it is for children to succeed without parental support and how important their participation is in the success of their children.

Parental Involvement

Even before school begins, an administrator needs to be sensitive to the outside influences that have already begun to develop children's character and habits. Much of a child's consequential learning takes

place long before the child enters the doors of formal education. Murphy (1993) estimates that "nearly 35% of the nation's children come to school not fully ready to be successful in kindergarten" (p.644). He goes on to suggest that we (the school):

Contact the new parents to let them know how to best prepare their children for school. The emphasis would be to encourage parents to enrich the home environment so that their children have a decided edge when they enter grade school.

Individual schools could keep close track of each child's progress, with community agencies standing by, ready to kick in when their assistance is needed. (p. 645)

Recently many federal grants have been secured for this very purpose.

While gaining parental involvement might be one of the most vital roles of an administrator, it can also be one of the most difficult and challenging. As a teacher, I spend far too many hours with empty seats during parent/teacher conferences and make far too many home visits in which I discover my students taking on adult responsibilities. Schools must be a positive ground for the nurturing of parents. Parents must not be judged, but valued and encouraged to participate in their child's educational life. The school must have

the welcome mat out for parents if we are to make an impact in a child's life.

A few times in every teacher's career, God places a cherub in their classroom to evoke patience in that teacher. I was not immune. Last year, I was blessed with a young man I'll call T. J. But somehow, wisdom (or the luck of the Irish) was also handed my way. T. J.'s mother and I became quite close and formed a coalition to help both his academics and behavior. We worked long hours brainstorming ideas to guide this metamorphose, and it paid off. He is a delightful young man who is now on the right track. Just like many others before T. J., I still hear from both him and his mother and probably will for many years to come.

Parents and family members are so important in the education of today's children. Kearns (1993) emphasized this point:

Chester Finn, former assistant secretary of education now with the Edison Project, coined the phrase "the 91% factor" to describe that part of the children's lives that take place outside of school. Students who stay in school from kindergarten through 12th grade will have spent only 9% of their time in school. So we cannot expect our schools to be solely responsible for the education of our children. There is an

African proverb that says, "It takes a whole village to educate one child." Clearly, the schools of the future will work hand-in-hand with parents, businesses, and the whole neighborhood to create communities in which learning takes place continuously. (p. 775)

At first glance this quote may tend to minimize the importance of the school's role. However, I believe such findings underscore how absolutely critical it is for schools to gain parental support. "Parents can play a key role in many aspects of the school, providing a sense of community that can nurture as well as protect children in a school setting" (Reed & Sautter, 1990, p. K9). My experience with T. J. and his mother illustrates the benefit and strength gained from parental support.

Coleman (1966) found that effective schools only account for about 4% of a child's educational growth. The most significant impact, according to the report, is the socioeconomic status of the parents. I have a personal bias with the extreme implication of that statement, but there is no denying the impact the role of the parents play in the child's educational success. It has been my experience that these parents don't volunteer in schools largely because they lack needed skills. This is a perfect opportunity to inservice

these parents to be effective volunteers. If we are truly an institution of learning and believe in parental involvement, it is our job to educate these adults also.

We need to teach parents skills so they can feel competent in the volunteer program. One of the most rewarding experiences I have had was to watch one of my previous parent volunteers come to Longfellow each day with her children to work toward her GED. I lost a terrific volunteer, but I gained the best role model for my classroom. At the end of the year, she was recognized for her completion of the program and the highest score on the history exam! With tears streaming from her daughter's eyes, and cheers from the entire class, we celebrated in her victory. Her unspoken message impacted my class, much more than I could ever have.

Celebrations

Schools tend to maintain a business-like environment where we get wrapped up in objectives, challenged by the curriculum calendar, and bogged down by evaluations. Often times, we forget to celebrate the little things that happen within the school. Students need to be recognized for their accomplishments. Those inexpensive certificates we give out for writing the alphabet correctly or accomplishing a 100 fact timed test within so many minutes are just the motivator that

many children need. Sending a child to the principal's office with an accomplishment instead of an infraction creates the message that the principal is an instructional leader instead of a rule enforcer. It is a boost for the student, for the teacher, and for the administrator as well.

Teachers also need recognition for their hard work. I know how taxing and demanding the teaching profession can be. Sometimes even the smallest words of praise or kind gesture gave me new incentive to go on. Some days those happy notes were the only things that kept me going. But beyond that, teachers (or everyone for that matter) need to be assured that what they are doing is good and that they are appreciated for their efforts.

If as an administrator I can lift the spirits of those around me with a bit of praise, a cutesy card, or a gathering to say "well done," perhaps my small role will reciprocate enthusiasm and may even be passed on to those in the classroom. Those genuine smiles are so keenly noticed by the students. They give the message that all is well.

I have never been accused of being a very somber person. As a child and a young adult, humor was a coping skill for me. I found myself needing to laugh, to fight through the fears that prevailed in my life.

Humor

A classroom can and should be a place where humor is encouraged. It brings people together. It crosses cultural and academic boundaries. It is age and gender friendly. Humor is a stress reliever.

The medical profession also has something to say about humor. Laughter causes the lungs to pump out carbon dioxide, the eyes to cleanse themselves with tears, the muscles to relax, the flow of adrenaline to increase, and the cardiovascular system to be exercised. Perhaps most important for those in schools, endorphins, the chemicals produced by the brain to relieve pain, are released into the bloodstream when a person laughs. Clearly, laughter is good for schools and those who inhabit them. (Barth, 1990, p. 515)

Often, the little things we share with colleagues about what happens in our classrooms can be just the right medicine. An example of this occurred recently to a colleague of mine.

A kindergarten student came running in from the boys bathroom yelling, "There's a flood in the bathtub."

Not totally comprehending what he had said, she asked, "Where's the flood?"

"In the bathtub," replied Timmy. "You know, the bathtub you pee in!"

At that moment, not able to contain herself, this teacher placed her hands over her face and began giggling. Timmy, alarmed by this action, placed his hand on his hip and stated, "Mrs. S., a flood is not funny!"

This teacher, being a very sensitive person said, "Thank you, Timmy."

Timmy thought she was thanking him for the report of the flood; however, this teacher was thanking him for putting a moment of joy in her life. We need to laugh and enjoy each other.

I want to be a part of a school where likenesses are shared and diversity is celebrated. Too often children don't feel like they measure up because of their differences.

Diversity

Diversity is not something to be afraid of, but something to invite. "The United States is a multicultural nation of persons of different ethnic backgrounds, classes, religions, and native languages. In addition, there are natural differences based on sex, age, and physical and mental abilities" (Gollnick & Chinn, 1990, p. iii). Schools need to be an open environment where these differences don't change the way children are treated.

Just as self-esteem must be a part of every school's philosophy, and therefore every activity of the day, so must an attitude of embracing diversity saturate the classroom. The teacher must become an active pluralist, who will imbue every aspect of the classroom with cultural and racial diversity. (Clark, DeWolf, & Clark, 1992, p. 59)

What will that look like? Ponder and Holmes (1992) explain the natural evolution. "Principals will care about the personal and professional well-being of teachers. Teachers will know and care about each of their students. And students will care about each other" (p. 226). Children of different cultures will learn and play together. Girls will be asked higher level questions in science and math class and boys will be given opportunities to express themselves through writing and literature. Handicapped students will be included in classes where modifications are second nature. Elderly citizens will be reading and sharing their expertise with young people. We can learn so much about ourselves through learning and celebrating about others.

The bottom line is that parents send us the best children they have. It is our job to take those "bests" and develop their potential in the most caring way we know how with a firm focus on learning. "We need to

understand that investing in our children is not investing in a special interest group or helping out somebody else--it is absolutely essential to every American's well-being and future" (Edelman, 1993, p. 7).

Conclusion

As I looked up, the secretary was coming out of the inner office. She told me that the superintendent would see me now. I rose from the chair, straightened my skirt and headed for the door. As I was adjusting my skirt, I felt the piece of paper I had tucked away in my pocket. It was a prayer I had found many years ago in a quaint little shop. I had cherished it as a teacher and have practically memorized the lines:

Enable me to teach with

Wisdom

For I help to shape the mind.

Equip me to teach with

Truth

For I help to shape the conscious.

Encourage me to teach with

Vision

For I help to shape the future.

Empower me to teach with

Love

For I help to shape the world.

.author unknown.

I will replace the word "teach" with the word
"lead." This will now be my prayer as an administrator.

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