A new leadership vision for secondary school principals: A reflective essay

Dana C. Deines

University of Northern Iowa

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Abstract
Reflective practice is based on the reality that professional knowledge is different from scientific knowledge, according to Kotter (1988). Researchers have not been able to establish a full understanding of the nature of professional knowledge in education. There are differing views on the terms and conditions of educational practices. The practice of every professional is a growth process not formed from a strict set of rules or research results. Professional practice is developed through trial and error. It has also been expressed as “thinking on your feet.” Educators find procedures that seem to work, and others that have failed. The working knowledge is largely a product of experiences for those who are creative, inventive and perceptive enough to reflect on their past.

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A NEW LEADERSHIP VISION FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper

Presented to

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by

Dana C. Deines

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Robert H. Decker

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Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Norman McCumsey

7-8-92
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

7/9/92
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
Reflective practice is based on the reality that professional knowledge is different from scientific knowledge, according to Kotter (1988). Researchers have not been able to establish a full understanding of the nature of professional knowledge in education. There are differing views on the terms and conditions of educational practices. The practice of every professional is a growth process not formed from a strict set of rules or research results. Professional practice is developed through trial and error. It has also been expressed as "thinking on your feet." Educators find procedures that seem to work, and others that have failed. The working knowledge is largely a product of experiences for those who are creative, inventive and perceptive enough to reflect on their past.

When principals use informed intuition, they are engaging in reflective practice. The process of reflection in action is basic to the "Art" by which educators deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, and conflicting values. This reflective process typifies the principal as he or she makes judgements in the management of a dynamic educational environment (Sergiovanni, 1987).

When administrators join with teachers in trying to make sense of complex situations, they must share ideas and perceptions to arrive at a course of action. In this procedure they are applying reflective practice to seek to establish professional intelligence.

A school cannot be run effectively by simply applying theory. The problem with management and educational theory is that they are often applied to practice directly when they should more appropriately be used to develop practical applications. Effective leaders must be able to inspire, motivate, and
communicate with others. Leadership does not lend itself to merely being a spectator sport, but rather leaders are the coaches (Kouzes & Posner, 1987).

The mission of today's schools is to provide effective instruction to foster the educational potential of all students. In order to attain this lofty goal it necessitates the improvement of teachers and teaching methods and techniques. This endeavor is the aim of most good supervisory programs. Finn (1986) suggests that the responsibility to improve a school system rests with the principal.

Reflective practice in supervision is characterized by the view that no one best way exists in teaching. The principal's supervisory strategies should reflect differing teaching styles and methods. Supervisory style options are a reflective response to differences in teacher personality, needs, professional development, and learning styles. This differentiated system of supervision should operate within the school's mission statement and be comprised of the school's purposes, educational and management framework, and, most importantly, should be characterized by a certain caring and warmth toward the teacher and student (Guthrie & Reed, 1991).

Despite the fact that certain classroom settings and teaching approaches may have greater potential for providing worth and support for classroom climates, no particular method can assure the nurturing of its students. Such nurturing is more a function of the teacher than any particular teaching strategy or technique.

Thinking reflectively about supervision and teaching requires that broad perspective replace the "one best way" view of practice. No one teaching method
is assumed to be better than another. Principals need to be sensitive to the conditions under which various teaching methods are most effective.

Effective evaluation requires that the principal is well informed about educational matters of curriculum, teaching methods, principles of learning, and classroom objectives. Evaluation strategies and methods need to take into account the objectives of the teacher and the specific teaching methods. Just as the teacher should provide for a warm and caring environment for the student, the administrator should provide certain nurturing for the individual teacher. A sound program should allow for differences in educational programs.

Developmental theorists are recognizing the importance of identifying and understanding the developmental stages of growth through which teachers progress in their work environment. The ability to recognize these stages of development is essential in matching supervisory options to differences among teachers (Glickman, 1981). These theorists assume that all teachers are capable of progression through common stages of growth. This progression is usually an orderly process from one developmental step to the next. The rate at which teachers move through these steps is also a reflection of the individual differences between teachers. The further a teacher progresses through these stages, the more mature their development is assumed to be. Reflective practice in teaching, as well as in supervision, requires that both teacher and principal bring complex cognitive skills to the analysis of their practice, and that this complexity be reflected in the practical decisions they make. Teachers with higher levels of cognitive complexity provide a greater range of teaching environments to students, and their classroom is characterized by a wider variety of teaching.
strategies and methods.

The cognitive complexity of the principal is positively related to the complexity of the interpersonal environment within the school. This cognitive complexity is concerned with both the structure and the content of thought process, with emphasis on the structure. This structure is defined in terms of the degree of differentiation and integration involved in the educational environment. Many theorists today feel that a move away from traditional methodologies toward better relationships within and between schools and communities is essential in establishing differentiation and integration (Sparks, 1991).

The application of a differentiated system of supervision that takes into account different levels of teacher cognitive complexity allows for personal and professional growth. When teachers are provided with an intellectually stimulating, challenging, and supportive environment, levels of cognition increases, reflective practice improves, and this is a key to effective teaching.

Reflective supervisory practice requires not only that supervisory options be provided for different teachers, but also that supervisory styles take different forms and shapes, depending on problems faced and teacher needs. Teachers are unique in their learning styles and the way in which they solve problems. A reflective supervisory program takes note of these differences and seeks to accommodate them in providing appropriate supervisory styles.

Learning styles can be useful in helping the principal to decide which particular supervisory option is most suitable for a given teacher. The real value comes in suggesting ways in which principals can work effectively with teachers.
The goal should be to provide guidance and help, enabling teachers to become more balanced learners and problem solvers, to enhance the educational environment.

Principals have a tendency to project their own ways of learning and problem solving on their individual teachers. Reflective practice in supervision requires that the principal's strategies be matched to learning styles of the teacher, not that teachers adjust their learning and teaching styles to those of the principal. Principals need to accept the differences in their staff and strive toward a more eclectic view of supervising (Barth, 1990).

Key to the process of reflective practice within the principalship is the basic assumption that good teachers have professional goals that are important to them. Given the proper opportunity, they will work hard to achieve those goals. The nature of such goals are influenced by professional growth stages, cognitive levels, learning styles, and motives that the teacher brings to the school.

Principals assume the responsibility of clarifying and clearing the path toward educational goals. Clarifying the path requires that goals be set, defined, and understood by all parties. Clearing the path requires that principals provide the necessary assistance, education, support, and reinforcement to help achieve each goal. Central to this approach is the understanding that the greatest satisfaction for teachers comes from having accomplished worthwhile and challenging tasks within a nurturing environment, not from an emphasis on human relationships and social interaction apart from the educational process. Providing differentiated supervision is one way in which the principal can provide the necessary path that enables teachers to accomplish the goals they consider most important.
The nurturing of each teacher individually is basic to the leadership of an effective educational environment. The atmosphere that the school has is a direct response to the attitude and concern from the principal. The atmosphere or climate not only indicates the quality of life in the school, but also influences the schools capacity for positive change. The climate that develops will determine the work habits and operating style of the teachers and students, and ultimately the quality of education of that school system.

A favorable school climate cannot be equated with school effectiveness, but it is an essential element that facilitates and enhances that effectiveness. School climate has obvious implications for improving the quality of work life for those who work in schools. The principal plays a key role in directing school climate energy into productive educational channels. Essential to this process is whether the teachers identify with, and are committed, to the schools educational mission. School improvement and effectiveness will not likely be accomplished without the presence of favorable school climate. The quality of leadership provided by the principal, to channel this favorable school climate, will determine its effectiveness within the educational setting.

Favorable school climate combined with quality educational leadership are essential keys to sustained school improvement and enhanced school effectiveness (DuBrin, 1984). Climates are built, shaped, and channeled as a result of effective interpersonal leadership by the principal. A highly visible principal who spends time in classrooms, and who visits with teachers and students about teaching and learning, is communicating the importance and significance of education to teachers and students. Quite a different message is disseminated by a
principal who is less visible to students and staff. Successful leaders put in extra amounts of time, have strong feelings about the purpose of the school system, and are able to focus on what's most important to education.

School improvement requires a strong commitment from the principal. A sense of direction and accurate information regarding present school conditions are very important. There needs to emerge a shared commitment between both teachers and principal that can only come from a healthy school climate. This is where the importance of reflective practice should be used to understand that school climate is a process variable in enhancing school effectiveness, and not a product variable.

Significant changes are taking place in how school leadership is viewed, understood, and practiced. These changes are part of a new administrative and organizational culture emerging throughout America's school systems. These changes reflect the adoption of new values, visions, beliefs, and commitments for school leadership.

There are many external conditions that are providing for these changes. The school system has a chance to make a difference in the lives of all children. The expectations of the school has risen, and there is a need for changes to occur. The public is requiring increased school productivity, and, at the same time, teachers are demanding enhanced quality from the work life they experience. These pressures are causing changes to take place in the way schools are organized, managed, and led.

New visions and insights that are emerging extend into the areas of school leadership, supervision, and teaching. Reflective practice is challenging the
applied science of professional practice within the schools. This development has an uplifting effect on school professionals as the roles of principals and teachers gain more importance and significance.

Significant insights into what effective leadership is, the forms it can take, and its impact on the excellence of education, are being uncovered. These insights have emerged from studies of leaders and leadership in highly successful organizations in both the public and private sectors.

Leadership has been understood and practiced with almost exclusive attention to its technical and human forces. Principals are being encouraged to assume strong, active roles of educational and instructional leadership. Schools have seen positive connections between these forces and school excellence. New leadership values are linked to the concept of reflective practice.

If a school is to be successful, the principal must respond to demands, constraints, and choices. Demands are those aspects of one's job that must be done. They cannot be avoided without putting one's job in jeopardy. Constraints are those internal and external factors that limit what an administrator can do. All principals face similar job demands and constraints. One principal assessing the demands, constraints, and choices of a given situation will respond differently from another principal in a similar circumstance. All principals can choose to reflect on their practice, and bring to the school the forces of educational, technical, human, and cultural leadership associated with school success (Barth, 1990).

New leadership values for the principal arise from the ways in which successful leaders view their world. This view is comprised of a person's mental
image, theory, and set of beliefs that orient a person to problems, help sort out the important from the unimportant, and provide a rationale for guiding one's actions and decisions (Sergiovanni, 1985).

Successful leaders have a different understanding than do ordinary leaders of how their schools operate. Ordinary leaders view their schools as having a tightly structured form, and operate like the mechanical workings of a clock (Weick, 1982). They are caught up with this clock mechanism image of cogs and gears tightly connected in an orderly and predictable manner. Most people like orderly things and feel comfortable with predictability and regularity in their lives. This view sees management with a sense of power and control.

There are several different models of leadership that have characteristics and actions found to be common in leaders of successful organizations. Successful principals resist accepting a direct link between research and practice. They recognize, instead, that the purpose of research is to increase one's understanding and not to prescribe practices (Tyler, 1984).

Successful leaders practice leadership by purpose. "Purposing" is that continuous stream of actions by an organization's leader which has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus and commitment regarding the organization's basic goals (Vaill, 1984). All of us in our work and personal lives want to know what is of value, desire a sense of order and direction, and enjoy sharing these with others. The object of purposing is the spelling out of key cultural strands that provide both excitement and significance to one's work life.

Highly successful leaders have a capitalistic view of power and authority. They exercise it to increase it (Kouzes & Poshner, 1987). They have learned the
leadership secret of power investment, in that the more you distribute power among others, the more you get in return. They know that accomplishing and achieving organizational goals is important. Teachers need to be empowered to act. They should be given the necessary responsibility that releases their potential, and makes their actions and decisions count. When directed and enriched by purposing and fueled by empowerment, teachers respond with increased motivation and commitment (Vaill, 1984).

Successful leaders know the difference between power over and power to. There is a link between leadership and power. Leadership is the power to influence. Power to is not instrumental but facilitative (Kouzes & Poshner, 1987). It is power to accomplish objectives, and to help others accomplish goals they believe are important.

There is no issue on which highly successful leaders differ more than their beliefs about quality control. To the ordinary principal, quality control is considered to be a management problem solved by coming up with the right controls. Successful leaders recognize that quality control is important, and strive to internalize and apply the concept. It has to do with what they believe, their commitment to quality, their sense of pride, the ownership they feel, and the intrinsic satisfaction they derive from the work itself.

The ordinary leader views the problem of leadership as giving workers something they want in exchange for something he or she wants. This is leadership by bartering, and lends to calculated involvement of workers, and limited identity with organizational goals and purposes. Successful leaders view this problem as an opportunity to provide incentives to staff members in order to
obtain the organizations goals. This, over time, allows for a deeper commitment of the staff by converting them into believers in what the organization is doing (Finn, 1986). This enables the teacher to share in the meaning, significance, and excitement of working on behalf of those beliefs.

Highly successful principals believe in uncomplicated, action-oriented organizational structures. This relatively simple approach has the advantage of encouraging group relationships among teachers and students, providing more readily for empowerment, and increasing one's identity and feeling of belonging. It places emphasis on what needs to be accomplished, and how best to do it without undue emphasis on procedural matters (Sergiovanni, 1987).

Good leaders know the difference between sensible toughness, real toughness, and merely looking or acting tough. Successful leaders demand and require strict adherence to common values while allowing wide discretion in implementation. They are outraged when these common values are violated.

Leaders of highly successful schools bring with them a complex view of schooling and education as a whole. No single model of teaching is sufficient to address all the aims of education, and likewise, no single method of supervision and evaluation is sufficient for all teachers. Paying close attention to theory and research, they heed well the success stories emerging from practice, but they have a conceptual rather than an instrumental view of such knowledge. Knowledge viewed conceptually is information for informing thought and enhancing professional judgement. This is what is required for leadership as reflection in action.

A passion for excellence means thinking big and starting small. Excellence
happens when high purpose and hard work meet (Peters & Austin, 1984).

Time, feeling and focus appear no matter what else appears. The administrator who puts in large amounts of time without feeling or focus exhibits "workaholism." Time and feeling without focus often leads to dissipated energy and disappointment. Time and focus without feeling lacks the necessary passion and excitement for providing leadership. Principals need to be more passionate about their work, clearer about what they seek to accomplish, and more aggressive in searching for understandings that lead to improved schools (Greenfield, 1985). Taken together, teacher motivation, climate, and change are the processes of administration representing the roads to school improvement. How these roads are mapped and traveled are important dimensions of reflective practice in the principalship.
REFERENCES


