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Self inventory and reflective practice: A personal case study

Charles K. Johnson

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Self inventory and reflective practice: A personal case study

Abstract
As I began composing the final draft of this reflective paper, seeking to articulate a personal professional vision for administrative practice, two broad streams of influence became apparent. For the past four years I have been employed by the Sac and Fox Tribe at the school it operates on the Mesquaki Indian Settlement near Tama, Iowa. For the last two of those years I served as the school's administrator. Since this comprises the entirety of my working experience as an educator, my thinking, values, and beliefs are directly tied to the nature of that setting and the events which occurred there. My sense of what is right and what is wrong, what works and what doesn't, what I value and what I don't, all are informed by the Sac and Fox experience.
SELF INVENTORY AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE:
A PERSONAL CASE STUDY

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Presented to
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Master of Arts in Education

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Charles K. Johnson
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Norman McCumsey

7-9-92
Date Approved

Advisor/Director of Research Paper

Robert H. Decker

7-15-92
Date Approved

Second Reader of Research Paper

Dale R. Jackson

7/15/92
Date Received

Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling
As I began composing the final draft of this reflective paper, seeking to articulate a personal professional vision for administrative practice, two broad streams of influence became apparent. For the past four years I have been employed by the Sac and Fox Tribe at the school it operates on the Mesquaki Indian Settlement near Tama, Iowa. For the last two of those years I served as the school’s administrator. Since this comprises the entirety of my working experience as an educator, my thinking, values, and beliefs are directly tied to the nature of that setting and the events which occurred there. My sense of what is right and what is wrong, what works and what doesn’t, what I value and what I don’t, all are informed by the Sac and Fox experience.

Twelve months ago I began the Master of Arts in Education degree program in Educational Administration at the University of Northern Iowa. As I attended the required classes, I began to see my experiences in a new light. I saw that there was a body of knowledge and practice which could provide me with tools to use in my work as an administrator. What I had been doing on a wing and prayer, so to speak, could be aided by proven techniques.

As my course work progressed, I came to believe that
there was a deeper level, beyond technique, to administrative practice. To be an effective administrator required that I not only know how to manage a school, but that I know why I was there and what the school was for. Personal vision and mission were required. As Barth (1990) points out, this personal vision is the framework within which we must function to avoid our behavior becoming reflexive, inconsistent, and shortsighted. Thus, the past year became a search for an understanding of what I believed and what those beliefs meant to the practice of school administration.

As I prepare to begin the next stage of my career in educational administration, I am confronted with the question of effectiveness. How can I combine the theories and practices to which I have been introduced through the graduate educational administration program, with my experiences of the past two years, into a working paradigm of leadership?

The past year has been an on-going 'clinical' experience, in which I often was introduced to a concept in the morning and returned to the school to try it out in real practice that afternoon. That some of these attempts met with success convinced me that I could increase my positive impact on the operation of a school by the application of principles of leadership. Now the
challenge was to assess myself and my situation through honest and accurate self-appraisal using the reflective process to plan for my future experiences in administration.

To facilitate this process, the case study method was adapted to my situation. As Kowalski (1988) points out, "...educated leaders make decisions on the basis of accumulated information which creates the likelihood that the response you choose will be effective." (p. 7). The Sac and Fox community and school district was described, then used as the foundation for articulating my beliefs and values. By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the Sac and Fox educational system, issues of school governance, programs, staff, and students were brought to light and my essential beliefs about how I plan to interact in future administrative roles emerged. By reflecting on my experiences at Sac and Fox I created a principle based personal mission and vision for quality education.

The Community

The Mesquaki Indian Settlement is located three miles west of Tama, Iowa. Its 4,000 wooded acres lie along the course of the Iowa River, surrounded by agricultural land, bisected by the Chicago Northwestern railroad, and bordered on the north by U.S. Highway 30.
The Settlement is home to the Mesquaki people, legally identified as the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi in Iowa, numbering about 1000 registered members, some 700 of whom reside on the Settlement or nearby.

The Mesquaki are a 'conservative' Indian nation in that they have maintained a strong connection to their unique culture and language. The Settlement is the only place where these people live and where their language is spoken and customs are practiced. Most of the Mesquaki people still speak their language and participate in the traditional religious/cultural practices of the Tribe. Included in these traditions are consensus decision-making, courtesy and respect for others, silent deliberation, and skepticism about change, especially when that change originates from mainstream, white society or white individuals. Extended family structures are still common.

As a Federally recognized Indian nation, the Sac and Fox Tribe has sovereign status, maintaining treaty relations with the United States government. The state of Iowa has no regulatory or legal authority over the Settlement, except in those situations wherein the Tribe chooses to follow state guidelines. All legislative, judicial, and executive powers are vested in the Sac and Fox Tribal Council, including control of the operation of
the school.

Historically, the tribal governmental system has been plagued by lack of professional standards, family and clan influence, and inconsistent implementation of policy. The system has operated as a curious amalgam of United States-like constitutional forms with traditional Indian decision-making processes. The blend has never worked with any great success, leaving a the Tribal government caught in a dysfunctional limbo.

The socio-economic situation of the Settlement is typical of Indian peoples across the nation. The unemployment rate of those living on the Settlement is over 65%. Twenty percent of the children come from single-parent families who are receiving welfare or A.D.C. Forty-three percent of the adults over age 25 do not have high school or G.E.D. diplomas. Tama County has the highest suicide rate in Iowa. All of the information listed above, taken from the Joint Guidance Proposal By The Sac and Fox Tribe and South Tama County Schools (1991), places the children in the 'At-Risk' category.

The School District

Sac and Fox Settlement School is a small, independent school district operated by the Sac and Fox Tribe. Funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the State
of Iowa, and various Federal grant programs, the school serves approximately 85 Indian children from early childhood through the eighth grade. A staff of thirteen certified teachers, seven teaching assistants, four administrative/office staff, and six support staff are employed at the school. All non-certified and support staff are Indian; twelve of thirteen certified staff are white. In addition to a typical elementary school course of study, the school offers daily instruction in Mesquaki language and culture to all grade levels.

Beginning with the 1991-92 school year, the Sac and Fox School has been selected to participate in a multi-year restructuring process, the BIA Effective School's Program. The school will receive funds and training to implement the correlates of effective schools, as they are enunciated by the BIA program.

The administration consists of the school administrator, a position combining the duties of a superintendent and principal; an assistant administrator, who also carries out duties of a principal and acts as coordinator for the school's Indian cultural programs; an office manager, who handles the financial operations of the school office; and a school secretary.

The school's history is complex. Schools have been operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the
Settlement for many years. An attempt by the BIA to close the school in the 1970's lead to a lawsuit from which the Tribe won an injunction allowing the school to remain open. In 1980, the Tribe took over operation of the school as part of a national Indian self-determination movement. Since that time, a six member, tribally-elected school board has governed the school.

In the twelve years of its existence, the school has had five administrators. There is also a history of turnover of certified teachers. Although that stabilized, with all regular program staff returning for the 1991-1992 school year, five certified staff members and the administrator will be replaced for 1992-1993.

The school faces a complex set of difficulties. The bi-cultural nature of the work setting, with about half the staff white, and the other half Indian, creates stresses. The two cultures have different paradigms; different work habits; different ways of expression; different values. These differences are sometimes exacerbated by the fact that the white staff are primarily certified, therefore receiving higher wages and exercising supervision over the Indian staff.

Lack of teacher empowerment also has a history at
the school. There is no collective bargaining; no employee unit; and consequently, resentment over lack of input by staff into wages, hours, and terms and conditions of employment.

The turnover in administrators has resulted in a lack of any overall, cohesive plan for the school. Many initiatives have been started, only to be dropped when the leadership changed. This has made some staff and community members skeptical about new ideas.

Governance of the school is complicated and rendered dysfunctional by several factors. When the Tribe took over the operation of the school in 1980, the Tribal Council set up a school board to control the school's operations. However, the Council retained control of two essential areas of governance; hiring and firing of employees and disciplinary action. This created a situation of two boards governing the school. The school administrator works directly with the school board, but only has marginal contact with the Tribal Council, which has ultimate control.

To further complicate the operation of the school, a consistent set of policies and procedures has never been adopted. When problem situations arise, the school administration is forced to make decisions which have
little basis in written policy. This problem is aggravated by the lack of job descriptions and clear understanding of the role of which the various elements; Tribal Council, School Board, administration, staff, parents, and community; play in the school's operation.

The community is divided in its opinions of the school. Some parents and community members are highly supportive, believing that the children must have a firm grounding in their cultural values and language if they are to succeed in the mainstream culture. The school is seen as the vehicle for imparting this knowledge in the modern situation, since the families are no longer doing so in many cases. The school is expected to be the carrier of the cultural tradition.

Other parents/community members have a low regard for the school, believing its programs to be substandard, and its efforts to teach Mesquaki culture inappropriate. About two-thirds of the available student population, grades prek - 12, attend school in town at the local public schools, rather than the Settlement School.

The Challenge

Having spent two years attempting to create a working school structure for the Sac and Fox Settlement School, how can the administrator take the personal strengths he developed there, combine them with the
lessons learned, and apply the synthesis to a new setting in a rural Iowa public school.

Individual Values

The starting point for successful school administration is in the personal values of the individual school administrator. If I am to lead others they must believe that I am worthy to be a leader. Covey (1991) says that leaders must display character and competency to gain trust or they will not be successful over time. Greenleaf (1977) expresses the same principle this way, "... the only authority deserving one's allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant status of the leader" (p. 10).

The principles of self-examination and awareness, an honest encounter with reality, admission of mistakes, and service form the foundation from which my actions flow. Frankl (1959) said that the final human freedom is the ability to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances. He went on to explain that the sort of person one becomes was the result of an inner decision, not of circumstances. As a human being, I have the ability to choose my response to any situation in my life. There is, to use Covey's (1989) example, a space
between the stimulus and my response to it which is the freedom and power to choose what the response will be. It is from this center that my self-awareness flows.

This leads directly to the concept of the honest encounter with reality, or proactivity (Covey 1989). If I have this freedom to choose, then I am responsible for what I become. Covey (1989) says, "Our behavior is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen" (p. 49).

As the school leader at Sac and Fox, I had to learn to apply this concept regularly to the problems inherent in the system. With the many dysfunctional elements there, it would have been easy to blame circumstances or individuals when difficulties occurred. However, I learned that success depended how I chose to respond, and whether that response was based on my principles, not on the outward conditions.

The other side of that reality is that there are conditions that I can control and others that I cannot. I know that I can change myself; how I react, what I think, and what I do; and I can influence others; but some elements of existence are beyond my control. To be effective, I need to plan, prioritize, and execute around my values and principles, making sure that I focus on the
things that are within my circle of influence (Covey, 1989). I need to focus not so much on the world and what needs to be changed in it, but on myself, I what I need to do to change those things over which I have control.

Acting according to these principles is not easy. But, as Covey (1989) says, "The power to make and keep commitments to ourselves is the essence of developing the basic habits of effectiveness" (p. 54). Due to this difficulty the likelihood of making mistakes is great. If I can immediately admit and correct these mistakes, they loose their power to control my next proactive possibility and build the climate of trust with others.

The final core value which informs my action is service. Simply stated, I wish to be a useful partner in all life roles and for my actions to be of service to others. This is the point at which my individual values move into their organizational application.

Organizational Applications

Sergiovanni (1992) discusses several modes of leadership. He points out that management theory focuses on leaders as individuals who single-handedly manipulate events and people so that vision becomes reality. They use personality, clout, and know-how to achieve desired ends.

This sort of command and instructional leadership
has its application. It also has its problems, for, as Sergiovanni (1992) explains, when command is dominant, teachers tend to become dependent and subordinate, and subordinates do what they are told, and little else.

However, there is another paradigm of leadership which Sergiovanni (1992) describes this way. "The leadership that counts, in the end, is the kind that touches people differently. It taps their emotions, appeals to their values, and responds to their connections with other people. It is morally based leadership—a form of stewardship" (p. 120)

It is this sort of leadership which touches my value of service. One of the most critical shortages at Sac & Fox School was the sense of empowerment. Employees there, both Indian and white, did not feel that they controlled their destinies or that what they valued controlled the school’s direction. On the other hand, individuals there had a deep sense of commitment to the students and to education. There was a moral commitment to children, growing out of the awareness of the children’s needs, and a belief about the significance of the school and its teachers in the children’s lives (Greenfield, 1991). Like many situations in Indian country, contradictory elements existed side-by-side.
If I wish to lead, I must first be willing to serve. My satisfaction will flow from the success of others. In Sergiovanni’s (1992) phrase, I become a ‘leader of leaders.’ This can be achieved through team building, leadership development, shared decision making, and striving to establish the value of collegiality.

One of the responsibilities of this sort of leadership is to give a sense of direction, to establish the overarching purpose (Sergiovanni, 1992). It is here that the remedy to the disparity between individual commitment and whole school lack of empowerment, that I witnessed at Sac and Fox, can be found. As Greenleaf (1977) points out, the leader can give certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty achieving it for themselves. For this to be successful requires the trust of others, and for trust to be forthcoming, the led must have confidence in the leader’s competence and values (Sergiovanni, 1992).

In the final analysis, what matters most is service to the ideas and values that shape the school. How then can the leader achieve this shared commitment? Vaill (1984) defines one basic element as purposing “that continuous stream of actions by an organization’s formal leadership which has the effect of inducing clarity, consensus and commitment regarding the
organization's basic purposes" (p.91).

Add to that the concept of empowerment, defined by Sergiovanni (1992) as "everyone is free to do what makes sense, as long as people's decisions embody the values shared by the school community" (p. 129). Along with empowerment should come enablement, for we are only empowered to do what we are able to do. This means schools need to provide support and remove obstacles so that the empowered can act.

Finally, it is the leader's responsibility to be outraged when empowerment is abused and when purposes are ignored (Sergiovanni, 1992). I found this to be a natural reaction when I saw shortcomings in what I and others did, and ran into obstacles to what we wanted to do. The real intent of management by outrage, says Sergiovanni (1992), is "to kindle outrage in others. When it is successful, every member of the school community is encouraged to display outrage when the standard falls" (p. 132).

As a servant, the rights and perogitives of the administrator's position should become less important, while the focus turns to the duties and responsibilities to individuals and the school. People and institutions trust a leader to fulfill certain obligations and duties. The leader is responsible to manage his life and affairs
with proper regard for the the rights of others and for the common welfare. In the final analysis:

The effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set - not to change behavior but to give others a sense of understanding what they are doing, and especially to articulate it so that they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior" (Sergiovanni, 1992, p. 140).

Combined Vision: What is a Good School?

"A good school for me is a place in which everyone is teaching and everyone is learning-simultaneously, under the same roof" (Barth, 1990, p. 513) I believe that as the principal in an elementary school, I should be a model learner. My statements and actions should show that I am actively engaged in a personal quest for expanded knowledge and improved skills. As a beginning principal, I can call on the experience of the staff, asking them to assist me in learning to be effective. By involving students and staff with planning and implementation of programs, my learner behavior will be seen in action.

A quality school should never be satisfied with where it is, but continually seek to improve the services
it provides to its clients. Therefore, change is a necessary part of the school and the principal should serve as a change agent. For this to succeed, the school staff have to perceive that there is a need for change. Barth (1990) says, "Individuals usually enter into collaborative relationships only after they come to realize that they cannot achieve their goals by acting alone" (p. 513). Creating this perception of the need to change can be accomplished by the principal's continual effort to put the mission and vision of the school before its publics.

The effective schools process is the framework in which I plan to serve as a change agent. The key to the success of the effective schools process is strong leadership by the school's principal (Steller, 1988). As defined in Office of Indian Education Programs' 1988-1989 progress report, Our Children: Our Message to the Future (O.I.E.P.), effective schools is a research-based planning framework which describes ten correlates found in schools that succeed. They are: (a) high expectations for student success, (b) a clear and focused school mission, (c) frequent monitoring of student progress, (d) a safe and orderly school environment/climate, (e) strong instructional leadership, (f) opportunity to learn/time on task, (g) home/school/community relations, (h)
curriculum and instruction [specific content/variety of methodologies], (i) cultural relevance, and (j) shared governance/participative management.

Ten steps are described in the process: (a) awareness, (b) orientation, (c) team selection, (d) creation of a mission, (e) choosing and gathering data, (f) selecting goals and activities, (g) communicating goals and activities, (h) drafting and approving the plan, (i) implementing and monitoring the plan, and (j) evaluating all in terms of the mission (O.I.E.P., 1988-89).

The principal will have to use situational leadership strategies to meet differing reactions to change. He will need to lead by providing information and guidance about the nature of effective schools. Most of the effective schools research reflects studies done in an urban setting. Connections will have to be developed to show how the same factors which brought success to at-risk students in large cities will also bring success in a rural setting.

Any process of change will cause fears, as staff members wonder if their familiar places in the structure may be lost. The administrator will have to play a nurturing role in these cases, demonstrated by the example of his own willingness to sacrifice his position
power in the interest of group success. This will mean a change from Model I behavior to Model II behavior by the administrator (Argyris and Schon, 1976). Just as individuals can learn to change their approach to interactions with others, so too can organizations change their theories-in-use to a more effective ways of taking organizational actions (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

For this process to work, the school will have to build on its strengths. If you want productivity you must treat your workers and your clients as your most important asset (Peters and Waterman, 1982). The people of the school; the students, staff, and parents; are the largest positive element in the equation. Situation-by-situation, and case-by-case, it will be the role of the principal to bring out what is best in this living asset.

Finally, two critical personal elements which I learned from the Mesquaki people will have to be present if I am to succeed as a school principal. They are humor and respect. There is a saying that as an administrator, you should always take your job seriously, but never yourself. Barth (1990) says that humor is both strongly associated with learning and that laughter releases endorphins, the chemicals produced by the brain to relieve pain. Indian people, who have long experience with pain, have developed humor; good-natured ribbing,
deflating egos and tense situations with a joke; to a
fine art. In the inevitable stress and strain of school
administration, I hope to recall the Mesquaki way of
going along to good advantage.

Respect for the rights, the feelings, and the
individuality of others is a cardinal principle of Native
American life. I did not know the true meaning of
culture until I witnessed the courtesy with which my
Indian co-workers and students handled the often tense
and tricky job of interacting with people of another
culture. If I can transfer this cultured approach to my
dealing with staff, students, parents, and community, I
will be far along the road to successful administrative
practice.

As I look forward to the future, I feel confident
that the lessons given me by friends and co-workers, at
Sac and Fox Settlement School and in graduate school,
have prepared me well for the tasks that await. I
believe that success is assured if we only believe in
each other enough.
References


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