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A personal vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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Abstract

To develop a vision for administration of the elementary school, one must first articulate one's vision for the school itself. In considering the role I might take as a principal, I must begin by questioning the school's purpose, structure and direction. Sergiovanni (1992) advanced the view that schools exist for a purpose, and leadership behaviors or organizational structures that do not enhance that purpose are ineffective and meaningless. Our purpose is to educate students. Does the school's structure support and its leadership point in the direction of offering the best possible education to all children?

A PERSONAL VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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To develop a vision for administration of the elementary school, one must first articulate one's vision for the school itself. In considering the role I might take as a principal, I must begin by questioning the school's purpose, structure and direction. Sergiovanni (1992) advanced the view that schools exist for a purpose, and leadership behaviors or organizational structures that do not enhance that purpose are ineffective and meaningless. Our purpose is to educate students. Does the school's structure support and its leadership point in the direction of offering the best possible education to all children?

In the United States the fundamental right of all children to real, quality educational opportunities has been asserted. In 1990, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) Standards Committee stated, "To merit a 'quality' rating, the school's program must respond to the particular needs of the individual children who attend the school" (p.1). I believe this critical measure of quality is often addressed only superficially. Although much has been said of the school's role in helping children appreciate diversity and ever-increasing resources are diverted to programs for special needs and at-risk populations, I see little evidence that educators appreciate and celebrate children's individual differences. To really extend opportunities to all children, we must show them and their families that they are valued members of our learning community regardless of their socio-economic class, gender, ability/disability level, race, or interests. Only when they

are truly valued will many children be empowered to strive, grow, and develop their full potential.

The question of how best to grant quality educational experiences to all children can be answered in part through the structure of our schools. To resolve the conflict between granting equity or promoting excellence we need to revise our ways of teaching and learning to embrace both ideals. Placing one above the other is to concede that schools either exist to provide opportunities only for those students who are already successful, or to merely level the field. I am unwilling to admit to either premise. Schools can better meet the needs of all children, as Goens and Clover (1991) stated in their description of quality school programs.

> Quality school programs ensure equity. They define and uphold appropriate standards for every student. All students must be exposed to quality in order to value it. Challenging programs are designed for all levels of ability, and school goals are applicable to the entire student population. (p.42)

In this essay I shall attempt to define a vision for administrative practice that leads to quality schooling for all.

Personal Characteristics

Within the courses offered in the administration program, I took part in numerous class discussions regarding our changing society and the increasingly complex needs of children and their families. The one feeling that was shared by all was that school leaders cannot long ignore the impact of those needs on the roles and functions of educators. Traditional services are not enough for children who cannot succeed

without extensive physical, emotional, or moral support. But on the question of how to provide the support that students need, very little consensus was apparent.

During the philosophical discussions the phrase "all students can learn" was often repeated, and none would dare to challenge it. However, I feel that many of my colleagues have not given sufficient reflection to its implications for school leaders. If all students can learn, and if as stated earlier all children have a fundamental right to learn, then as an educator I must take much more responsibility for those who do not learn. The principal, I believe, should not rest if even one student fails or drops out. Yet failing and dropping out are the extreme manifestations of school problems which usually occur only at the secondary level. The elementary educator must recognize and work to eliminate the earlier signs of students' lack of success such as passivity, lack of effort or achievement, or acting-out behavior.

But must the principal shoulder the responsibility and blame for all student problems? Must we jump into every reform and improvement effort, spreading our resources ever more thinly in our attempts to meet those "increasingly complex needs"? No, but this view does argue for continually renewed efforts to change and improve schooling. It suggests constructing supportive and collaborative relationships with teachers and developing shared goals as we look toward future needs.

Patterson (1993) asserted that we need to create a "preferred future" rather than allowing the school to be driven by the past. He urged

school leaders to begin by constructing core values, which he defined as "statements reflecting our firm convictions about why we exist....They are things we believe to be extremely important to our organization" (p.41). A core value, therefore, might state that we exist to offer quality educational opportunities that lead to success for ALL students.

What are quality learning experiences? What is student success, and how do we measure successful teaching and learning? Noddings (1992) suggested we move away from the idea of schooling as the road simply to higher economic status.

> Instead of painting a hierarchical picture of success in terms of money and power, we should discuss success in terms of loving relations, of growth in individual capacities, of lasting pleasure in various worthy occupations, of satisfying connections with living things and the earth itself. (pp. 137-138)

Does this view preclude accountability and excellence? Although to some the words loving, growth, satisfying, and pleasure may seem incompatible to the task of improving education, I do not believe they are. An educational leader can demand the best from self, teachers, and students and still promote a positive, healthy climate that takes into account the strengths, needs, abilities, and values of the individuals in the school community. To do this the principal must assure that the students are accepted as individuals, their needs assessed, and they are treated with respect and compassion.

Children are treated with respect when they are given challenging, meaningful work in which they can stretch the limits of their ability and experience the pride of accomplishment. If all children are to be

challenged, teachers must know what they are currently capable of and help them envision and strive for what they may achieve. The educator must guard against the tendency to underestimate those students not seen as college bound, which "reinforces the categorization of students and the deterioriation of expectations" (Goens & Clover, 1991, p. 42).

Compassion is shown by sensitivity to students' need for support in breaking down the barriers to learning, and by providing that support. Stewart (1993) opined that for children (and teachers) to break down the learning barriers that they have erected, they must be relaxed, hopeful, and confident. For this to occur they must feel secure, knowing that they are valued even if sometimes they fall short of their goals. The heirarchical structures and relationships based on competition for power, control and achievement which characterize many schools may prevent students from feeling respected and valued. According to Stewart it is this valueless, hopeless feeling that causes people to be unteachable, as they sabotage their own success. Believing they will fail, students act as if they do not care. In turn, teachers give less support, become more judgmental, offer fewer challenges, and distance themselves from the needs of students. I feel that this cycle could be broken and most school failures prevented, if educators had the requisite skill, inclination and resources to grant sufficient respect and compassion to all their students.

As he looked at quality and student needs, Noddings (1992) framed several issues:

> We have to stop asking: How can we get kids to learn math? How can we make all kids ready for college? How can we keep kids in

> school even though they hate it? And how can we prepare teachers for the real world of teaching? Instead we have to change that world. We have to ask: How can my subject serve the needs of each of these students? How can I capitalize on their intelligence and affiliations? How can I complete the caring connection with as many as possible? How can I help them to care for themselves, other humans, animals, the natural environment, the human-made environment, and the wonderful world of ideas? (p. 179)

With effective leadership, I feel that teachers can be led to a greater awareness of and commitment to meeting all children's needs and challenging them to grow. But change is a slow and often difficult process, and according to Richardson, Short, and Prickett (1993) it is individual, internal, and impossible to force. Some teachers are accustomed to viewing some children with little or no hope for success, and they expect grouping practices, schedules, teacher workloads, and grading policies to reflect that view.

As a principal I cannot hope to impose my personal vision on the school community and have it adopted without question. I must convey my beliefs through communication, actions and decisions. My dealings with students, their parents, and teachers must be models for the respect and compassion that I expect teachers to show. Only then can we begin to transform the school into a community of learners in which each student feels valued, safe, and intellectually challenged.

Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes

Highly touted educational trends such as site-based management, shared decision-making, collegiality, teacher empowerment, outcomes-

based education and assessment, total quality management and team-building offer promises for dramatic school improvement. Through these innovations, educators have revitalized their worklives and reshaped their programs to strengthen the services they offer. But in reality many schools are trying to implement these new "cures" without allowing adequate time, resources, or administrative committment, and the results may be less than transformational. Since principals and teachers are the frontline workers in improving educational practice, I looked at researchers' findings on how they experience educational reform and deal with change.

Hallinger, Murphy, and Hausman (1992) examined the attitudes of principals toward restructuring, in order to illuminate their perceptions of its impact on teaching and learning. The authors concluded that widespread fundamental reform will be hard to achieve, because even principals who feel they support restructuring have visions limited by their experience, training, and traditional beliefs. Most of the principals described restructuring efforts as small, familiar improvements involving teacher empowerment in some decision-making area, rather than broad or fundamental changes. Furthermore, they expected the impact on students and learning to be minimal.

Although the majority of restructuring efforts thus far have focused on changing the roles of teachers and improving their occupational conditions, some reformers have argued that "direct efforts to improve classroom teaching are needed if restructured schools are to correct the

weaknesses in American education" (Murphy, 1990, p.5). Changes which are needed in the classroom, as listed by Murphy, include:

> (a) less reliance on traditional organizational arrangements and more innovation in the delivery of services; (b) less didactic teaching and greater reliance on interactive and cooperative learning strategies; (c) emphasis on depth and interdisciplinary approaches in the curriculum, together with greater teacher choice; (d) greater student engagement in the learning process with more active, meaningful involvement; and (e) increased attention to an equitable distribution of classroom resources such as time, quality of instruction, and rewards. (p.5)

Successful examples of each of the above conditions can be found, but they are far from common practices, and very few schools have implemented all five. In order for these changes to occur, the roles and skills of teachers also need to change. Staff development must be designed to give teachers the tools and skills they need to integrate new teaching approaches. Additionally, the design of the school day, including student grouping practices and scheduling must allow for depth and student engagement. Lastly, thorough and continuous evaluation of student progress must provide the basis for educational decisions, especially those which will result in change.

The educational reform movement has led to the adoption of federal, state, and local policy initiatives. One of these, California's Mathematics Framework (California State Department of Education, 1985) was part of an ambitious curricular reform that aimed to change the teaching of math dramatically. The intent of the framework was to restructure the mathematics classroom into an experiential environment

where students explore alternatives and problem solve, where math is taught for understanding.

Darling-Hammond (1990) interpreted five case studies which detailed the efforts of teachers to respond to the new curriculum. She found several problems with the adoption. First, the state's process of changing the curriculum consisted of issuing a statement and regulations and approving new texts. Policy reformers were not investing the time, resources, professional development opportunities, and support necessary for teachers to make curricular changes successfully. Also, teachers were expected to modify their beliefs, knowledge, and actions in the teaching of math under high-risk conditions, which consisted of the state's continuing demands for content coverage and its use of the same standardized tests to evaluate success. Finally, no widespread effort was made to help teachers integrate the new framework with their current skills and practices. The result was that the teachers were trying to comply with a curriculum they did not fully understand, sometimes using inappropriate methods.

To really effect change, Darling-Hammond (1990) suggested, educational leaders must look at specific policies and ask:

> What differences do they actually make in the way teachers and students work together?...How and under what conditions do policies intended to change teaching actually do so? In what ways are the context, texture, and process of learning activities transformed? What are the factors that distinguish between superficial compliance and fullsome embraces of new ideas? (p.235)

The answers to these questions may provide the direction for improved staff development, changes in school schedules and teacher workloads, and new relationships among teachers and administrators. But these changes do not happen automatically, as I found during my recent introductory experiences in administration.

In the first, as coordinator of a summer school program for students with multiple disabilities, I supervised six teachers for a two week program. My goals included encouraging the teachers to collaborate and team-teach and helping them coordinate schedules to provide maximum opportunities for experiential, thematic learning. The second administrative experience, my practicum project, involved building an interdepartmental team of the staff who worked with students I teach. The team included educational assistants, dormitory houseparents, a speech pathologist, school psychologist, and myself. Its goals included collaborating and problem solving in the areas of student needs, including challenging behavior, and designing more flexible schedules so that educational and residential staff could work together. As I reflected on these experiences, especially the frustrations and difficulties encountered, I found areas in my leadership skills that needed improvement.

Mallory (1990) declared that the leader's role is "to influence the thinking, attitudes, and behavior of others to produce a desired result" (p.18). For the desired result, greater student success, the thinking, attidudes, and behavior I most wanted to influence were those which

affect relationships in school, specifically those between students and teachers, among teachers and other staff, and between teachers and administrators. I had hoped to replace competition and isolation among staff with sharing, collaboration, innovation and risk-taking to improve instruction and interactions with students. I studied team building (Mallory, 1991) and total quality management (Bonstingl, 1992), but soon found that implementing them required more than a reading knowledge of the principles and methods.

In a short, intensive session such as a summer program one cannot hope to radically change teaching methods or skill levels, but I had assumed the teachers were familiar with collaboration and team teaching. I was disappointed to find them unreceptive to new teaching ideas or strategies. It seemed that they believed nothing could be improved, so they had no reason to try. But after struggling with the collaborative process during my practicum, I began to see that the teachers' reactions were normal responses to changes that seemed difficult, even impossible to incorporate in their work. I later realized that my own defensiveness when my practices were questioned by the team mirrored that of the other teachers whom I had wanted to "collaborate" and improve.

Because of this realization, as principal I will respond more positively to teachers who seem unreceptive to new approaches and defensive of their current practices. Instead of trying to force the issue, I plan to listen to their concerns and provide as much support as possible

for their efforts to improve. Depending on the nature of the specific problem, this support may take the form of staff development, flexible schedules, opportunities to observe and be observed by other teachers, and time to problem-solve and brainstorm solutions to issues and identified needs.

Barth (1990) characterized many schools by isolation, adversarial relationships, and frenetic schedules that allow little time for reflection, discussion, and collaboration. These conditions have existed through much of my teaching experience and affected me more than I had realized. The parodox between my conviction of the importance of cooperation, openness, and change to insure student success and my efforts at self-preservation and protection illustrated the inner conflict that makes change difficult. To create a climate in which innovation and improvement occur within a safe and challenging environment, the school leader must first confront this inner conflict.

The need for openness is a common theme in the literature of change. According to McGill, Slocum, and Lei (1992) "learning requires that managers be truly open to the widest possible range of perspectives in order to identify trends and generate choices" (p.11), and openness "requires that managers be willing to suspend their need for control" (p.11), to be replaced by a need for shared values. The authors listed several management practices which promote openness. These include: commitment to diversity; use of multi-functional work groups; absence of

jargon, turf, and "expert" domains; conflict-surfacing and conflict resolving; and availability of information to all members.

Patterson (1993) also portrayed openness as a key factor to growth; as schools try to change they must adopt new values that will allow them to break from the past to their "preferred future". These values include openness to participation, openness to diversity, openness to conflict, openness to reflection, and openness to mistakes. But reading that the leader must be open, like hearing that I must "improve" and "change" still did not tell me how. With what specific actions and behaviors might I promote this growth in myself and others?

Bolman and Deal (1994) offered several guidelines to teachers developing leadership skills. The first of these, building relationships on a basis of caring, inquiry, and advocacy, provides a model for openness and inclusiveness. To build relationships in potentially adversarial situations, open up communication when a problem risks producing tension. Engage the issue directly, while communicating respect and caring for the other person. Ask questions and listen. Make an effort to continue listening, even when you disagree or are fearful about what they might say. Inquire into the other's views, and work to understand them. Then, be honest, and advocate what you believe in. Finally, ask for feedback. "If the feedback is surprising or negative, listen, acknowledge its importance, and share your own feelings" (p.77).

Central to this process is the communication of caring at each step. Rather than simply resolving conflict, Bolman and Deal (1994)

focused on replacing that conflict with collaborative relationships by listening and demonstrating respect and trust. Without doing this the principal cannot hope to empower teachers, and school improvement will be nothing more than changes in rules and procedures. By using active listening and showing respect and trust in daily interactions with teachers I hope to build these relationships, and nurture the openness which characterizes learning organizations. Then, as teachers feel safe to take risks they will work to improve their services to students.

As he discussed collaborating for change, Donaldson (1993) stated that the leader must first be able to face criticism without blaming or defensiveness, and welcome self-examination. Only then can he or she help teachers probe into their own practices and beliefs, set achievable goals, nurture new efforts, and celebrate staff and student success. In this non-threatening context where self-examination is the rule and blaming is the exception, the principal can lead the faculty to reflect on the efficiency of their work in the light of student outcomes and the amount of resources used. Teachers can then adjust their plans, activities, and efforts to see that progress occurs.

But why emphasize building collaborative relationships, making teachers feel respected and secure? After all, improvement has been described in terms of refining processes (Bonstingl, 1992), systems analysis (Willis, 1993), the scientific method and continuous improvement programs (Garvin, 1993), and redesigned organization, governance, and teacher responsibility (Murphy, 1990). One might think

that all that is needed is teacher inservicing to improve methods. But while I recognize that the specific restructuring tools are essential, I have read several good models for school improvement and am confident that more exist. It is important to focus on improving student outcomes, but regardless of which model is used, the critical issue is the ability of teachers and administrators to actually implement the change. I believe that the relationships through which we support one anothers' efforts have a great impact in all educational endeavors.

Teaching is a personal and dynamic act. It requires skill, knowledge, creativity, and as Stewart (1993) asserted, a positive state of mind. To those questions with which Darling-Hammond (1990) asked educational leaders to evaluate their policies and initiatives, I would add my own: How can the principal insure that change is not superficial, that learning activities are transformed, that the new initiatives really do result in quality educational experiences for students? I believe that only by opening the communication lines and building trust, can the principal know whether teachers have the resources needed to fully implement new ideas.

Through the experiences discussed earlier, I discovered that teachers need and deserve the same respect and compassion that I would have them give to students. Many feel that they are trying to do the impossible with inadequate time, little administrative support, no "safety net" for risk taking, and few rewards for innovation or superior performance. The principal's primary focus, then, must be to link

cooperatively with teachers, provide support for their efforts and a safe environment for taking risks, and transform adversarial relationships into cooperative and collegial ones (Barth, 1990).

Inherent in these roles and practices is an on-going commitment of resources to collaboration. School leaders must be willing to devote the time necessary for collective reflection and action. Time has been identified as a crucial component in restructuring (McCaslin & Good, 1992; Raywid, 1993), and lack of common planning time was one of the greatest obstacles to progress in my own team-building efforts. Finding ways to free teachers for these endeavors will be a major priority for me.

Raywid (1993) cited some useful criteria for how collaboration time should be offered. She stated that collective work time should be "prime-time", and not merely the end of the regular school day. The time must also be sustained, or longer than a single planning period. Though beginning and end-of-year workshop days are valuable, Raywid argued that teachers also need opportunities throughout the school year to reflect on daily events and practices. Finally, schools need to provide ongoing, planned programs for class coverage to free up teachers, because it is unfair to expect teachers to give up all collaboration time from their personal lives, yet most of them will not leave their classrooms if they do not feel confident about what happens in their absence.

Personal Professional Vision

To be successful in transforming the elementary school into a dynamic learning community with shared goals, cooperation, and

collegiality as its hallmark, the principal must work in such a way that each act and decision promotes these values. I feel that by encouraging thoughtfulness, cooperative and goal-directed educational experiences, and commitment to helping one another succeed, I will be able to help move the school towards providing a quality education to all its children.

Though change can be a slow, even painful process at times, I believe most teachers are open to it given the support they need to feel that they can succeed. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) studied factors related to teachers' commitment. They concluded that for experienced teachers, those things which affected their ability to perform "core teaching tasks" most strongly influence their commitment. Those items include performance efficacy, psychic rewards, discretion and task autonomy, and learning opportunities. The authors suggested that "during periods of crisis in the commitment of teachers... principals who are confident about the teachers' ability and motivation may share their authority, thus empowering the teachers" (p.254).

School improvement, then, can be introduced in ways that positively affect teachers'commitment, by addressing those factors most important to them. The values that I will bring to the principalship include insistence that all children learn and succeed, supportive and caring relationships throughout the learning community, and openness to change and growth. By taking into account the teachers' needs and freeing them to reflect on and develop shared values I hope to begin empowering them to have a greater voice in the school.

My hope is that, as a principal I will be able to help transform the educational experience for all students into one that is more humane, that opens them up to the joys of learning, and provides the support they need to be successful. As a principal I will communicate my beliefs to teachers, listen and seek to understand their concerns, and provide them with the support they need to succeed in their demanding roles. Together, we will create a caring, high quality elementary school.

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