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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

James Olivero (1980) stated, "Without leaders, any dream is likely to fade in and out of focus. For today's education, the principal –more than any other person – is the keeper of the dream..."(p.1). I want to be keeper of the dream. I want to be instrumental in helping all children learn. I want to make a difference in the lives of children. I want to work along side classroom teachers encouraging them, supporting them and cheering them on. I want to work with parents, community leaders, and business leaders to cultivate an environment for children, both in and out of school, that is conducive to learning and demonstrates to children that they are cared for, loved, and safe. I have a devout belief that education is the greatest legacy we can leave to our children, and I want to be institutional in carrying out the legacy left to me. All of the above said reasons are my reasons for wanting to become an educational leader.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
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
Jennifer S. Lindaman
December 1996**

This Research Paper by: Jennifer S. Lindaman (250829)

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY
SCHOOLS: A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for
the Degree

of Master of Arts in Education.

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James Olivero (1980) stated, "Without leaders, any dream is likely to fade in and out of focus. For today's education, the principal --more than any other person -- is the keeper of the dream..."(p.1). I want to be keeper of the dream. I want to be instrumental in helping all children learn. I want to make a difference in the lives of children. I want to work along side classroom teachers encouraging them, supporting them and cheering them on. I want to work with parents, community leaders, and business leaders to cultivate an environment for children, both in and out of school, that is conducive to learning and demonstrates to children that they are cared for, loved, and safe. I have a devout belief that education is the greatest legacy we can leave to our children, and I want to be institutional in carrying out the legacy left to me. All of the above said reasons are my reasons for wanting to become an educational leader.

My effectiveness as an educational leader will be a result of four critical components: my journey through childhood and adolescence to adulthood, the personal characteristics I possess, the preparation I received in my graduate program, and my personal vision of educational leadership. These four areas of my life have shaped me into the person I am today and will greatly impact the role I will play as high school principal in the very near future.

The Journey

My journey toward becoming an educational leader began before I was born. I truly believe a commitment to education is so deeply embedded in some families, it becomes a part of their genetic make-up and is thereby inherited by children. My maternal grandfather was a school principal and superintendent; my maternal grandmother was a third grade teacher; my father was a teacher and coach; and two of my siblings are educators.

Being the oldest child of four has also contributed to my aspirations toward leadership. Growing up I was often told by my parents, "You are the oldest; you set the example by which your younger sister and brothers follow. They are watching each choice you make, and are trailing in your footsteps." I took these words to heart, and carefully contemplated each decision I faced, always striving to make the right choice. Being the oldest I was often left in charge of the household while my parents attended meetings or social functions. I enjoyed these occasions as I knew it illustrated that my parents trusted me to keep things under control.

My father's words, "Kiddo, you can do anything you put your mind to. Set your goals and go after them. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Recovering from mistakes builds character," have had a

profound effect on my educational career. I began in third grade wanting to be a pediatrician. This was my goal, and I set forward on the path to achieve it. I entered the University of Iowa my freshman year of college ready to get to work, and received my first "D" in a class. The class was chemistry, a crucial requirement of premed students. I knew this was one of those character building experiences. I evaluated my strengths and weaknesses and decided to change the goal to becoming a secondary mathematics teacher. Hence, I transferred to the University of Northern Iowa and began to strive for that goal.

The summer before my senior year of college my dad died suddenly of a heart attack. I do not recollect much of the days following his death, however, upon returning to summer school and my part time job, a friend and coworker asked, "Jenny, how come you came back? If I were you, I would have taken the year off to be with my family. How are you ever going to get through student teaching this fall?" I could not answer other than to say, "Dad would have never wanted me to lose sight of my goal for anything. He definitely would not want me to quit."

Personal Characteristics

The characteristics instilled in me as a young child will serve as strengths in my endeavors as a future principal. First of all, I am dedicated and committed to educating all children. I have a sincere faith in and love for children. Schools have a responsibility to cultivate a nurturing climate in which all children can learn. Educational leaders serve as catalysts for this environment. In other words they set the tone for the culture. We must create environments which encourage risk taking, but also provide a safety net for mistakes. Kids must be told that it is okay to make mistakes and then given opportunities to rectify those mistakes.

Secondly, I believe my enthusiasm for education will play a key role in helping to motivate educators. In my current position, even though my official title is secondary mathematics teacher, I often take on leadership roles in our district. I believe this is due to my ability to be enthusiastic about any task given to me. I am willing to take the extra time and go the extra mile if it means helping other faculty members or students.

As a high school math instructor, I have observed that when children are in elementary, most have a natural curiosity about the world around them and an intense desire to learn. However,

somewhere between elementary and high school, that curiosity begins to wane. I believe this also happens to some educators. Upon entering the teaching field, they are full of enthusiasm and excitement for teaching, but some where along the line their enthusiasm tapers off. I believe this apathy to be a direct result of poor leadership.

Educational leaders have an obligation to promote professional development for all teachers, both beginning teachers and veteran teachers. We proclaim to educate children to be life long learners. Why then, should not educators be models of life long learners. I believe many school districts see professional development as a low priority because its impact on kids is not direct. However, I truly believe that through professional development we can impact kids more positively than through any other method. If we can develop teachers into classroom facilitators with multiple teaching styles, various learning strategies, and an enthusiasm for teaching, they will begin to take responsibility for the learning that takes place in their classrooms, rather than just for the information that gets dispensed in their classroom. I am enthusiastic about education every day, and it is my hope as an administrator, that I can assist educational professionals in generating and fostering enthusiasm for learning.

Lastly, my organizational skills together with my conscientiousness will assist in my professionalism and effectiveness on the job. Leaders must be credible and ethical in all aspects of their lives, not just in their profession. Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It (Kouzes & Posner, 1993) is a book in which the authors discuss what people want from leaders and how leaders can be effective in their leadership roles. Kouzes and Posner conducted a survey and found that most people want leaders who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, competent, and supportive. Teachers, students, and parents want school leaders with integrity and credibility. Honesty, competence, and conscientiousness in a school principal demonstrate the integrity and credibility of the individual.

Educational Preparation

The first course I took in the graduate program was Introduction to Educational Administration. In this course we discussed four different frames of reference administrators inherently work from (Bolman & Deal, 1991). The human resource frame of reference or administrative style is my preferred frame. I thoroughly enjoy the interplay and dynamics of collaboration. For the most part, I am a flexible person and believe that consideration

of peoples' attitudes and beliefs is important. I believe schools exist to serve human needs, and that schools and people need each other. However, when I am pressed, I cling to structure. I want everything organized to a fault so that I can spend less time thinking about it and just do it. I also feel very strongly that structure plays a key role in the education of kids. I think there are times when students must have structure, and I'd go so far as to say some students even want it. The problem I see with the structural frame is that it views the students as objects rather than people. I guess it is the human resource side of me that says without students, all we are is a structure, a red brick structure.

I believe the key aspect regarding the frames of reference is understanding that it is not a matter of fitting into one frame or another to become an administrator, but rather a need for understanding the perspective that each one represents. The secondary principal at North Tama once shared with teachers that there is a difference between having a view point and having a viewing point. Having a view point is self-centered; you only know where you stand. Having a viewing point allows you to view where everyone stands. I believe this relates to how we perceive frames of reference. Our view point is how we look at the world in general, but

it is important to also have a viewing point in which we can look at the world in different perspectives than our own. Similarly, we each, as individuals, have our own "frame" of reference, however it is almost crucial that we have other frames in which to look through when our own frame of reference seems incongruent with the particular situation.

In regards to educational leadership I feel very strongly that no person can be all things to all people, including administrators. A successful administrator is a person that is willing to become "... a juggler and tightrope walker as values are deftly handled and balanced" (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston, 1992, p. 16). I feel it is important for administrators to keep this in mind when making decisions. Administrators must always strive to make the right decision in any given situation, but recognize the final decision may not always make everyone happy.

Another aspect in education that I feel very strongly about is community involvement, and maybe even more importantly, community unified spirit. I believe it takes an entire community of people to raise a child, not just parents and schools. Churches, community organizations, and business members all need to unite on behalf of the children in their districts. As a parent I know that my

husband and I are much more effective in shaping the behavior of our children, if we work together and present a united front. I believe children thrive in school districts where the entire community works together to see that the needs of children are met. Neither parents, nor schools can do it alone. Dr. Dale Jackson (personal communication, Fall 1995) affirmed many of my beliefs in the course, Schools and Community Relations. Dr. Jackson made it very clear to me that community involvement is not just a matter of having volunteers come into a classroom and help a teacher or asking a business partner for a donation. It is far more than that. Community involvement is about giving ownership of schools to the community. If community members feel a sense of responsibility toward the school, they will find effective ways of collaborating with educators. Schools in many ways have taken ownership away from communities by becoming too territorial over facilities, and by making the communication one-dimensional - the school asks and the business provides. Community involvement must be an exchange process by which both the school and community profit from the relationship.

The principal is a key player in the design and success of community involvement. Marsha Speck (1995) states:

The principal must provide the dramatic leadership that will make a difference in the lives of children and not accept the mediocrity and failure rates that exist in many of our nation's schools. The principal must be the driving force that orchestrates the variety of stakeholders (students, teachers, staff, parents, and community) into a school learning community that is dedicated to the success of all students no matter what the current circumstances. (p. 41)

Effective principals will be those who serve as a bridge between the community and the school.

One of the most enlightening courses I took was Supervision and Evaluation with Dr. Robert Decker (personal communication, Summer 1996). Upon completing his course I was excited about the process of teacher evaluation. I learned that evaluation does not have to be a painful process for either the teacher or the principal, rather it can be a rewarding experience for both.

The principal's role in evaluation is similar to that of a teacher in the classroom. The principal's role is to help develop effective teachers, just as the teacher's role is to develop effective learners. Principals have the same choice teachers do in how they will insure this development. They can be dictatorial in nature and tell the teacher what they did wrong and how it should be corrected, or they can be facilitatory in nature and guide the teacher to discover his/her strengths and weaknesses. By encouraging the teacher to examine

the effectiveness of their teaching, the principal allows the teacher ownership of the situation. Together then, the teacher and principal can develop a plan for professional development that will insure the effectiveness of the teacher. With this approach every teacher in the district grows professionally, even the master teachers.

The seminar course taught by Dr. David Else (personal communication, Summer 1996) served to develop my self-confidence in assuming a principalship. In this course Dr. Else led us through many case studies, class discussions, and simulations in which we got an opportunity to test out our philosophies and skills. He provided us with specific strategies for dealing with many of the difficulties we will face upon embarking on a principalship. This course also helped me develop a network of peers which I can call on at any time for advice and suggestions.

A Vision for Educational Leadership

My vision for educational leadership begins with honest and open communication. I believe straightforward communication with students, teachers, parents, and others is the key to an effective principal. This communication is not only important in formal settings, but in informal ones as well. In an article describing the characteristics of an effective principal John Cruz (1995) states:

"Some principals are doomed from the beginning because they cannot effectively communicate with parents, teachers, and students" (p. 15). Communicating the school's vision and purpose both in actions and words is one of the school leader's most important tasks (Mercado & Peeler, 1993).

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership and consensus building play instrumental parts in my vision for educational leadership. Collaboration and consensus are vital components in school reform and school restructuring. Schools across the country are faced with change each and every day. Reform efforts must be structured in such a way that all stakeholders have an investment in the change. In my opinion school leaders who choose to be top-down dictators will experience unpleasant battles and will be unsuccessful in their reform efforts. I refuse to be a top-down dictator. I want to work with educators in and out of the classroom. I want to be a sounding-board and cheerleader when teachers have new techniques to try in their classrooms. I want to celebrate the little successes in education with teachers and students on a weekly or even daily basis.

Passionate Leadership

A commitment to and an enthusiastic approach to education by every educator in a district is another component of the vision. These characteristics may be summarized in one word - passion. Today's educators must teach from the heart. Bolman and Deal (1995) in Leading With Soul state: "The heart of leadership lies in the hearts of leaders" (p. 1). Anyone working in an educational capacity is a leader. They are, therefore, a role model and mentor for students. Kids feel what adults feel. Kids are sensitive to attitudes of adults. If we don't care about our job, dread coming to work each day, and gripe about the negative aspects of life, how can we expect kids to have positive attitudes regarding their own education. Learning environments must be positive, creative, and exciting. It is important to recognize that the actions of educational leaders speak louder than the words. Successful school principals exhibit a passion for education and are sincere in their efforts to make a difference in childrens' lives (Speck, 1995).

Culture

A caring, compassionate culture is an integral part of my vision. The school principal must work to shape the values and norms of the culture in such a way that best supports instructional effectiveness.

By developing a culture conducive to learning the school principal can directly impact student performance. Research has shown that effective cultural leadership affects student achievement (Allton, 1994). I believe secondary schools should be structured for kids, not adults. Many districts avoid making physical changes in their environments such as posters on the walls, plants in the hallways, music or lamps in classrooms claiming it is too costly, and students would more than likely destroy the objects anyway. I, personally, do not believe this to be true. The majority of students I know would be appreciative of any changes made in this direction. Yes, there would probably be a handful of students who would attempt to cause problems, but more than likely it is because they have not been taught how to behave appropriately. We are quick to jump down kids' throats when they mess up, but very seldom do we ever provide them with an alternative behavior choice. Friedland (1994) states, "Any substantive effort to redesign our public schools must emphasize a positive, dynamic, and uplifting school climate to serve as the best learning environment for students" (p. 31).

Creating a caring environment is not a subject discussed in faculty meetings, however, I would argue that it should be. Research conducted by C. Marshall, J. Patterson, D. Rogers, & J. Steele in 1996,

suggests that effective principals are ones who develop an ethic of care within their schools. This ethic of care must be developed not only within the student body but amongst the entire school community. Experts believe (Marshall, 1996):

If we also want students to learn how to care for themselves and each other, administrators and teachers must engage in genuine dialogue with them, build continuity and a sense of trust through repeated and consistent interactions, and model caring by living it. (p. 278)

I find this to be one of the most profound, yet obvious statements I have read in educational literature. It makes great sense, yet so few schools seem to operate in this manner. Changing a school's culture rests in the hands of the school principal (Jewel, 1994). School principals must work to develop a climate for students that includes an ethic of care, mutual respect, trust, and hope.

In closing, I must say what I value most in the educational process, is children. As I said earlier, they are our most precious resource, and we must treat them as such. Kids and our world's future are our reasons for being in this profession. I also value dedicated and committed teachers who, on a daily basis, help students make their dreams become reality. They are the ones that are the true educational leaders. One of my favorite quotes from my

course work is, "Vision without action is merely a dream, action without vision is just passing time, vision with action will change the world"(Barker, J.).

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