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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering elementary schools: A reflective essay

Abstract

This essay is intended to articulate my beliefs, concerning student principal relations, discipline, school vision, philosophies of educational development, values of instructional leadership, and marketing and management as to what I perceive to be the successful operation of an educational administrative practice.

A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

A Research Paper
Presented to
The Department of Educational Administration
and Counseling
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Mitchel S. Rorris
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This Research Paper by: Mitchel S. Rorris

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING
ELEMENTARY 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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5-13-94

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This essay is intended to articulate my beliefs, concerning student principal relations, discipline, school vision, philosophies of educational development, values of instructional leadership, and marketing and management as to what I perceive to be the successful operation of an educational administrative practice.

Student-Principal Relationship

I wish to reflect on my own experiences that show a relationship to my perceptions of the total school atmosphere, starting with my elementary school principal when I was a student, following to my current teaching assignment.

Facing the Spider's Lair

I remember vividly the first time a teacher asked me to deliver a message for her to the principal. I was in second grade, and all contacts with Mr. Andersen had been quite positive and my repose while in his presence was as good as could be expected. I must note that Mr. Andersen stood nearly six and a half feet tall, which is quite intimidating to a second grade person.

As I quietly walked down the hallway I felt fine and completely at ease. However, upon entering the office, I became quite scared. There was a sudden change in the room's temperature as compared to that of the hallway. The office was extremely warm and the odor was most unpleasant. The odor, that even today I still sense, triggered my sense of alarm, telling me that I should exit with haste. I saw Mr. Andersen lean around his desk--he moved like a large spider--a spider that awaited unwary children! I threw the note on to Mrs. Lepore's (the school's secretary) desk and ran back to class. I did not volunteer again for the duty of being the messenger.

My first experience at the principal's office had been horrifying. I may note that I had never been in the office unaccompanied before. My admiration for Mr. Andersen shattered, but I entered the spider's lair and survived!

My story to most might seem to be nothing more than a young boy's fantasy--an imagination that had run rampant. I view it as a memorable lesson about rapport and visibility.

Rapport

It is my belief that one of the most important responsibilities of an elementary administrator is to establish rapport with the students. It is vital that the students see principals in all pertinent roles in an elementary environment. However, a principal should be a person that no one fears. A principal interacts with students while still portraying an authoritative figure, not a dictatorship.

When I interact with students I believe that I should clarify what I expect of them as well as instruct them as to what they should expect of me. An administrator creates means of initiating contact time, outside of discipline, such as inviting students to the office in order to receive recognition for doing a good job or encouraging underachievers to keep working hard. Other opportunities that arise during the school day are lunch time, playground supervision, walking the hallways during between-class time period, before or after school bus supervision, and classroom visitations. These small interactions establish rapport, while building student self-esteem and allowing children to view the principal in a positive role as opposed to being only the disciplinarian.

Visibility

All of these opportunities offer time for an administrator to be visible. Visibility helps an administrator keep a watchful eye on school operations and prevent discipline problems. This may, for my staff, facilitate an awareness that I am on top of matters and am providing support.

Discipline

Discipline is another component that must be maintained so that the building possesses an environment conducive to learning. I have learned that if one expects certain desired behaviors, then one models those desired behaviors. Modeling clarifies specifically what is expected from students and staff.

Communicating this message of disciplinary expectations must be done at the beginning of the year and not presented after a major problem has occurred. In explaining my message, I must be very thorough, concise, and willing to enforce my policy consistently.

Meeting Mr. Discipline

An experience that I had in seventh grade involving discipline illustrates the necessity of a principal communicating disciplinary expectations.

The very first day of seventh grade registration the principal gathered the student body into the auditorium. Mr. Dennler, the principal, proceeded to lecture us on the topic of discipline. I was sitting in the balcony listening intently. Mr. Dennler went on and on about discipline. I had never heard the word before and was becoming quite concerned because he sounded most serious. I leaned over and asked a friend if he had any idea as to what the word discipline meant. It was then that Mr. Dennler stopped talking and began pointing his finger at me. He requested my presence at the podium on the stage--in front of the entire school. Naturally, I tried to play dumb and sat very still. I hoped that he would let me off the hook and continue. My luck, as usual, wouldn't allow such a simple solution. Mr. Dennler jumped off the stage and proceeded to run up to the balcony and escorted me out of the auditorium.

When the assembly ended, Mr. Dennler returned to his office where I was waiting. He did not ask me what

I had done, but asked me if I had heard anything that he was explaining. He then pronounced sentence on me even before due process had been followed. I was never allowed to tell my side of the story. Corporal punishment was the acceptable or allowable form of punishment at that time. My sentence involved the threat of corporal punishment. I wanted no part of a spanking--especially on the first day of school. It was obvious to me that the crime--if any--did not fit the punishment. No, I did not receive the spanking. I had forced him to allow me to explain that I was extremely confused and things were not becoming any clearer. I learned another memorable and valuable lesson.

If Mr. Dennler's message to the student body had been clearer, then our (Mr. Dennler's and mine) problem would have been avoided. When confronted with a discipline problem, I must be sure that all parties involved understand why they are involved.

Discipline: Pros and Cons

In an article found in my local paper ("To Beat,"1993) the topic focused on a principal in West Virginia. He was an advocate of corporal punishment. In most states, including Iowa, corporal punishment is

not allowed. Research findings, as stated in the article, indicate that children who face corporal punishment tend to develop negative feelings toward school and may suffer physical-mental problems as well. But, on the other hand, research also claims that spanking may be proper for students who are willfully disobedient. Granted, there may be times when a spanking is due, however I won't allow spanking as a form of discipline in my school. It is against the law.

Conflict Resolution

Many problems can be resolved by using practical skills. I have been trained to resolve conflicts by using the Conflict Resolution Process. This process allows people to voluntarily help resolve their own problems while being guided by a trained manager through a logical, controlled process. This format also provides due process, so that if any further action is needed, no one's rights have been violated.

Another beneficial method of dealing with discipline is to use the Anastasio, Perry and Lane {A.P.L.} methods. This process follows a belief that in order for discipline to be followed, then the authoritative figures must define and model the

expected behaviors. When there are occurrences when the expectations are not met, then a reteaching session between the violator and the authoritative figure, must be held. The timing of the session must take place within 24 hours. During this session the violator explains why they are there and the authoritative reteaches the desired behavior. If you have a repeating offender, then the duration of each session is extended. Once again, due process is being followed--the violator explains, the authoritative figure reteaches, due process as previously understood is achieved.

Leadership

My staff will be looking to me for leadership. I prefer to view the role of the administrator as an analogy to the role of a head football coach. I believe that I possess the following qualities: to be very supportive, cooperative, sensitive, and an acute listener. Any successful person must have these qualities. If your staff believes that you believe in them and are involved with them, they in turn will return to you the same. As the old adage states "what goes around comes around."

Meeting Dan Reeves: Head Coach of the Denver Broncos

In clarifying the relationship of leadership to that of a head coach, I will share an experience of having the privilege of hearing Dan Reeves speak. Dan Reeves at that time was selected "Coach of the Year" and, more currently, he was selected again in 1993, but with another team.

All too often a coach is evaluated on winning the Super Bowl. But those who really understand why a coach is selected for the Coach of the Year know that a leader with a vision has experienced success. In Dan's presentation he expressed the key points that he believed made him and his team a success.

Dan made the point that everyone on the team and his coaching staff must understand the "point of their being on the team." In other words, why are you here and what is your job? Everyone had to understand their purpose and how their actions can effect the outcome of their personal and the team's success. Winning was not the main point, but growing and learning. Dan believes that when people know how to and what was expected of them, then, their success will come.

Once everyone understands their purpose, then, collaborative decisions can be made. Dan believes that if you don't know what you are there for, you can not contribute to any decision that will directly effect you? People must make some decisions together because this creates a strong bonding, a sense of ownership. When people own things they are more apt to take care of those things. In the case of a football team, the players take care of each other on the field and success is predominantly the outcome.

The last point that Dan discussed was that of being comfortable or willing as a coach to render or relinquish some power to his players. This is a major growth factor for a team. Ultimately the head coach catches all of the heat when things do not turn out as one would wish. There will be those times when a better decision could have been made either by the coaching staff or the quarterback. However, in reality does not the team suffer the loss as well as celebrate the victory? What ever the outcome, all involved are effected by the outcome. Regardless of the outcome, the players and coaches alike have grown and learned. Dan closed his presentation with this thought: as long as we continue to grow and learn together, maybe, just

maybe, that Super Bowl victory will come our way (D. Reeves, personal communication, March 27, 1979).

Personal Vision of Administration

Leaders must have a vision before they can begin their trek (Sparks, 1992). It is possible to get those who are lead easily to go along with you like sheep following one another to slaughter. I believe that I can best explain my vision in much the same way that R. Barth explained his vision (Barth, 1990).

To begin with, I believe that my vision portrays and ideal school under my administration. A successful vision for a school clearly states the "point" of education (Green, 1987). Essentially, is a school not be a community of learners? We expect the students to learn, so as Mr. Barth stated, teachers and administrators as well should be learners. If teachers and administrators do not continue to learn, grow and reflect--how can we escape the old paradigms that we follow? In my journey through my masters program I have learned and am aware of so much more about myself. I have grown as a person, a father, and as a teacher. This is directly attributed to the dedication of the instructors, Dr. Decker and Dr. Doud. They have emphasized time and again in class discussions, the

importance of continuing to learn--attempt to break away from the old paradigms that are being used. My vision places the principal in the role of being an advocate for learning--an instructional leader--for all members of the school community. Just as a great head coach, as a leader, encourages his players to give more effort and to be willing think in different terms, so does a great administrator.

Drifting Aimlessly: The Call for Instructional Leadership

Not everyone administers schools with a vision. Unfortunately I must conclude that there are schools that just drift along. There is no desire for teachers and administrators to form a clear vision. I come to this conclusion based on interviews that I held with various administrators. When these administrators are asked about what their vision is, they tend to give answers that do not address what a vision is or they do not answer at all. Without vision, how can a principal be an instructional leader? Principals are held accountable for boosting student achievement in their role of instructional leader (Carter & Klotz, 1990). Smyth (1983) acknowledges that observational reports of

principals reveal that many possess inadequate training in instructional leadership. He states:

At the expense of generalizing, it would seem that the principal's role as an instructional leader, knowledgeable in pedagogy and classroom processes, is very much subservient to his or her role as a plant manager.

He adds: . . . I don't see principals as being entirely to blame in the matter. They have been capably aided and abetted by academics who have convinced them of the indispensability of large amounts of organizational theory, administrative behavior, and economics and politics of education.

This has, of course, been at the expense of a sound understanding of teaching and learning theory (Smyth, 1983).

This observation of principals trained as plant managers is also supported by Rallis and Highsmith (1986). They, too, conclude that most principals receive training in administration, not teaching or curriculum or philosophy of education; thus, they are unprepared to lead instruction in their buildings.

An effective leader communicates his vision to all of his followers. Not that the leader's vision is the only option for a vision, but rather a beginning point. Becoming a united community of learners allows for the vision to be formed--a school that learns together, stays together!

A viable means of creating a community of learners can be directed through leadership--leadership that facilitates staff development--development that communicates the vision to teachers, students and parents. Communicating the vision is somewhat like following a map. Hopefully, those reading the map are not holding the map upside down. A shared vision is essential. When people clearly understand their role within the vision, the likelihood of success increases.

Collaborative Formation of the Vision

In forming my vision, I allow for the philosophers in the community of learners to ask questions. Questions lead to discussion and clarification of the vision. During the discussion time, it is essential that the leader keep the vision in focus. They must be aware that the philosophers and traditionalists are going to question the change because the philosophers and traditionalists are naturally going to be caught up

in their old paradigms. Collaborative formation of the vision develops ownership. When the members believe change can occur, then the members can make change happen. I believe that collaboration provides a certain amount of security. The need of security is very critical in reaching self-actualization. If people are expected to change, then security must be provided. The process of change creates anxiety, conflict and ambiguity, but the outcome is a sense of security. Security comes from collaborative decision making. Those involved with the decision have ownership and are not out on a limb all by themselves and strength is found in numbers.

This process--working collaboratively--of forming the vision will enhance collegiality. Change always contains a level of risk-taking. However, the beauty of a shared vision is that everyone is going through the change. Hopefully, the isolation factor is reduced. Once the isolation factor is reduced the anxiety level for attaining expected standards is also reduced.

Sharing the Vision

One benefit of the shared vision is that a choice is provided. People choose to be a part of the school.

Commitment follows after choice. I know that when I choose to become part of something, I always commit myself to doing the best that I can.

Sarason (1990) explains that greater teacher participation in decision making is a component of restructuring schools:

... when a process makes people feel that they have a voice in matters that affect them, they will have greater commitment to the overall enterprise and will take greater responsibility for what happens to the enterprise. (p. 13)

Leading the Way

A great leader is a vocal advocate for everyone pulling together in order to achieve the vision. A key component of success is to have an agreed upon means of achieving the vision between the leader and the staff and evaluating the process. It would be possible that the total staff could set yearly goals for school improvement and development. As discussed in the course dealing in the classroom evaluation, these goals would be linked to their role in achieving the vision and could be assessed through the evaluation process.

The term instructional leadership focuses administrators' attention on first-order changes--

improving the technical and instructional activities of the school through monitoring teachers' and students' classroom work. Yet, instructional leaders often make such important second order changes as building a shared vision, improving communication, and developing collaborative decision-making process (Leithwood and Montgomery, 1986; Duke, 1987; Smith and Andrews, 1989).

Learning to Laugh

The last component of a successful administrator to address is that of humor. When things change situations are going to be difficult. The old phrase--we'll probably laugh at this someday--is bound to be applied. I suggest that in some cases that I do not wait too long before I laugh. Readers Digest has a section dealing with laughter being the best medicine. According to Mr. Barth's information, laughter is very therapeutic--relaxing muscles, cleaning out eyes with tears, and giving your circulatory system a work out. Anyone who works in education understands that we need all the therapy that we can get. And laughter doesn't cost the district any money.

Management and Marketing

Finally, in order for administrators to help secure a soundly balanced school, they must learn to combine effective school management and marketing. As a leader, the administrator must be able to do the following:

- Formulate a vision

- Communicate effectively with employees

- Provide incentive for top performance

- Evaluate programs and personnel

- Practice fiscal accountability

- Market outcomes effectively (NASSP, Jan., 1991).

Utilization of these leadership techniques will help achieve a quality product and thus keep the public, who is your support base, satisfied.

When educational outcomes are not up to meeting the public's standards, administrators come under attack. Achieving a quality educational program may require the incorporation of the following management practices:

- Initiate practices aimed at reducing anxiety among staff members, such as fewer meetings, less paper work and more recognition of good performances.

Establish expectations and communicate them to all employees.

Formulate goals by involving administrators, teachers, and community representatives.

Conduct annual reviews of achievement followed by specific strategies to improve weaknesses.

Involve all staff members in planning faculty meetings and development programs.

Evaluate all personnel on a regular basis based on the individual goal performance (NASSP, Jan., 1991).

When these practices are implemented, then your desired educational outcomes can be achieved with enthusiasm. Pride, dedication and team work will increase among employees. This is very powerful medicine. Community relations information needs to be shared in a positive manner. The next step is to publicize and market the successes that the district is experiencing.

To effectively market your successful educational outcomes the following may be helpful:

Weekly staff news letter allows for internal communication

Allow qualified staff members to give presentations at community group meetings

Invite reporters, television, and radio personnel to your school to cover news worthy events.

Encourage all staff members to speak positively of all school business at all times (NASSP, Jan., 1991).

In summation, I want to emphasize the importance of the perception that education administrators create. The perception begins when an administrator expresses a vision for their school. The next step is to involve all staff members so everyone shares in the development of the vision. As the vision develops each person will assume his/her role with a clear understanding of the process and the agreed upon tool for evaluation. When you attain success, market the good news. Be sure that you do not neglect to give credit where credit is due. The school is made up of players, students, teachers, and a leader, the head coach, the administrator. Lead well and you will lead your team to a worthy victory.

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