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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools: A reflective essay

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Abstract

As I reflect upon becoming an educator, I found myself reminiscing about the people who shared in forming my values and vision. It was a group of people who through their thoughts and actions motivated me into becoming a teacher and continuing my education to become an administrator. As a non-traditional student, I have gathered many thoughts, feelings, and emotions about education and my role as an educator. I have been molded by those around me who I thought were effective teachers and great role models.

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

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by
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July 1995

This Research Paper by: Terry L. Strait

Entitled: A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTRATING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

A REFLECTIVE ESSAY

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

1-6-95

Date Approved

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1-29-95

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2.9.95

Date Received

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As I reflect upon becoming an educator, I found myself reminiscing about the people who shared in forming my values and vision. It was a group of people who through their thoughts and actions motivated me into becoming a teacher and continuing my education to become an administrator. As a non-traditional student, I have gathered many thoughts, feelings, and emotions about education and my role as an educator. I have been molded by those around me who I thought were effective teachers and great role models.

I first looked back to my parents who both shared in giving me something unique and special. Growing up poor, I was blessed with learning the lessons of life in their purest fashion. My father taught me a strict work ethic of doing things right and not questioning authority at inopportune times. My mother taught me patience, understanding, and a love for the simple things in life. My parents always loved children, and always treated my friends, no matter what their race or religion, as their own. I am indebted to all my elementary and junior high school teachers who tamed a wild young boy into one who appreciated the basics of math, science, and language arts and there was no better

place than school. It was in high school that I finally started to connect with what I will refer to as my calling, "education". Two teachers, Darrell Larson and Ken Pfile led me to a new level in learning. The experiences they offered me in their open classrooms and their flexible teaching styles fit my learning abilities. They taught me many lessons about our society during a somewhat radical period of history with balance and understanding. It was those two men who taught me about other people and their problems and inspired me to be an activist in support of individual rights and freedom. The military was my next educational experience. Leaving home a naive white boy from Iowa, I was immediately shocked by the new cultures I was faced with and the discipline of the military. I came away knowing I could do almost anything I wanted to do or had to do. Off to college after the military, again I was blessed in having two instructors at the community college who inspired me to make education my life. Tom Sears taught me how to take history and relive it as a continuous story, intriguing, suspenseful, and meaningful. Liz Anderson taught me how to interpret literature as no other had been able to.

She gave me the appreciation of the written word and its power. At Mt. Mercy, my methods teacher, Sister Roberta, continuously prodded of my spirit and intellect into gaining new insights into everything around me. Every time I discover something new I think of her as my inspiration. I admired her intelligence and common sense approach to the simple fact that we are in education for the children. Lastly, my former building principal, Dr. William Jacobson kept reminding me in each evaluation that I should enter a graduate school program and become a high school administrator. His confidence in me and his willingness to teach me lessons gave me the needed direction.

I would love to say that all the readings and lectures I have received over the past nineteen years in my formal education have formed by beliefs and values, but I would be lying. I have learned most from those who have shared something special in their lives with me. I have observed their effective behaviors and the passion that motivates them in their jobs. I am a little of each of them. Graduate school has helped solidify the foundations set by those people and the experiences I have had in my past. It has forced me to

read at a professional level with vigor and desire in search of new knowledge and insights into my profession. I will continue to be a life long learner and an educated administrator.

Vision

My vision as a secondary principal has become more focused and clear. As I prepare for my first administrative position, I constantly find myself in search of information that will help build my foundations for leadership. Although I feel I have many qualities of a good administrator, I believe it is essential in education to constantly be in search of new knowledge and abreast of new trends and methods. In preparing for this paper, I have found myself entertained as well as enlightened, saddened as well as pleased, and sometimes confused in my quest for innovative new directions.

I believe first, an effective administrator should have a personal perspective on what kind of leader they are and how they intend to lead. After reviewing the research, it becomes evident that becoming an effective leader is an evolutionary process. An administrator must be able to plan and evaluate, budget

and bargain, recruit and hire, communicate and motivate, finance and govern, as well as educate those who are actively involved in the functions of education. The challenges of equity, liberty, and our environment continue to challenge administrators. I believe that this paper has begun the reflective process of what an effective leader is to me, and what qualities and skills I need to take into the field of administration.

Leadership

As I began my research on effective leadership, I was overwhelmed by the literature and studies. I immediately narrowed it down to topics that interested me which included: characteristics and traits of effective leaders, styles of leadership, and how leaders manage conflict. I first asked the question, what makes a good leader? Early studies attempted to list personal traits of those who were effective leaders. They frequently generated different conclusions about leaders' characteristics and created a list of characteristics too large to use. Critics of the "traits" approach to leadership theory pointed to the unwieldy nature of the list of characteristics to substantiate their claim that there are no leader traits

that will hold for all leaders (Piele & Smith, 1991).

Eventually, trait theories were abandoned in favor of

situational theories of leadership based on the belief

that there are no inherent leadership traits, just

leader styles or behaviors that may change radically

from one situation to another. I always believed that I

have inherent leadership qualities, and some research

still suggests that leaders are born, not made, but

these findings have opened my eyes to the understanding

that I must not always lead but sometimes follow.

Today, there is renewed interest in the characteristics

of effective leaders. This research has taken on a

different path and has not looked for any single

characteristic that determines leadership, but suggests

that there are groups or constellations of qualities

that appear to correlate with leadership.

One of the characteristics in this group of

effective leaders is their ability and willingness to

learn. Learning to be a leader is somewhat like

learning to be a parent or a lover; your childhood and

adolescence provide you with basic values and role

models, but most of the learning takes place during the

experience. It is a human process, full of trial and

error, victories and defeats, timing and chance,
intuition and insight (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

The part that interested me most about effective
leadership characteristics is that of leaders being
people oriented. I have based my vision on that concept
and believe I am a people oriented person. In one study
of principles, Richard Gorton and Kenneth McIntyre,
(1978), found that effective principals have as their
strongest asset an ability to work with different kinds
of people having various needs, interests, and
expectations. Creating autonomy among students, staff,
and parents to form a vision and create change is a key
in restructuring (Mercado & Peeler, 1993). To be a
people person, a principal must be sensitive,
passionate, humorous, patient, and compassionate (Clover
& Goens, 1991). I know I have some of those
characteristics and now have a foundation to build on
others.

As I perused the information on leadership style, I
came away with bits and pieces of many theories.
Because leadership by definition includes action, any
theory of leadership is helpful only if it can be used
to guide action. Leadership style goes back to the

Theory X or Theory Y (McGregor 1960), subordinate-
centered leadership or boss-centered leadership
concepts. Most researchers believe that there is no
ideal approach that fits all situations; rather, the
best view of leadership style is that it must vary to
fit the particular situation at hand (Blanchard,
Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1987). I found out that I use an
integrated style of leadership, one that combines task-
oriented behavior with relationship-oriented behavior.
This style will allow me to be flexible and promote
risks within my building and school community.

The last section on effective leadership I
researched dealt with managing conflict. I believed
this area to be of importance so I could better handle
the changes I will be facing as I become an
administrator. Also, I believe that too much time is
dedicated to conflict and conflict resolution in
education and the trends seem to be continuing, taking
away from the administrator and their role as
educational leader. Conflict is a natural part of human
existence (Lindelow & Scott, 1989). Conflict exists on
many levels and takes many forms. The public school
administrator is the focal point of conflict by the very

nature of their role as leader. As an administrator I must realize that conflict can be creative and constructive. Conflict opens up issues, develops clarification of issues, increases involvement, improves problem solving, and is needed for growth (Lippett, 1983). To achieve mastery of conflict management, the educational administrator must understand conflict, its type, sources, and dynamics, besides being familiar with numerous techniques for managing it. I have come to realize that as an administrator, I must become more passive and reflective in the management of conflict. I can now identify my conflict management philosophy as that of being an interactionist, recognizing the necessity of conflict, encouraging it at times, and realizing that conflict management is a major responsibility of an administrator.

Administrative Issues

The second aspect of the paper will deal more with specific issues administrators face today. After endless studies were released about what was wrong with American public education in the eighties and nineties, public education has been scrutinized by business, government, and our communities. Reform and change has

come and gone typically in cycles, and with reform, so
have all the emotions and concerns of the educational
community. As an effective administrator, I must come
to grips with the conflicts associated with change and
be prepared to meet the challenges of my constituents in
a professional manner. One of those changes I will
focus on will deal with the student population itself.
Our demographics in Iowa are beginning to change,
reflecting the racial and ethnic makeup of our nation.
I believe, and I am concerned, that our education system
is not ready for what this changing student population
will bring. Alternatives and choice in public education
has already begun in most areas of the nation as a
response to, "Our Nation At Risk." When Iowa begins to
meet the new demands set upon it by our new populations,
alternatives and choice will be topics which will be
highly publicized and extremely volatile. I hope I am
preparing myself for the leadership I will need to
handle these changes.

Reform and Change

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in
Education published "A Nation at Risk...The Imperative
for Educational Reform" that charges this nation with a

task of developing reform in our educational system.
This commission established, "indicator of the risk",
that our nation was facing, opening the door for our
educational systems to be scrutinized by the public, and
test grounds for many reformers. Those indicators of
the risk were; International comparisons of achievement
reveal that on 19 academic tests American students were
never first or second, and in commission with other
industrialized nations, were last in seven areas.
About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United
States can be considered functionally illiterate.
Average achievement of high school students on most
standardized tests is now lower then that of 26 years
ago when Sputnik was launched. Many 17-year-olds do not
possess the "higher order" intellectual skills expected
of them and nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences
from written material (The Nation Commission on
Excellence in Education, 1983). The Commission probably
did not expect the phrase, "at-risk", to become
synonymous with a particular large group of students.
Educators continue pointing to a growing number of
children who are at risk of school failure, and the
future of these students is now widely accepted as the
greatest challenge facing American education.

Identifying the at-risk students becomes a
challenge in itself in that many experts have numerous
theories published and written with no clear or decisive
characteristics of what is an at-risk student. Most
literature is consistent as to the nature of the dropout
population and that is important information in
identifying an at-risk student (Institute of Educational
Leadership, 1986). Haasl and Phelan (1992), believed
that students being identified as at-risk demonstrate
one or more characteristics that contribute to their
lack of success, including: previous grade level
retention, behind in required courses and or credits,
poor school attendance and attendance history, substance
abuse problems, low self-esteem, dysfunctional family
interaction, adjudicated as delinquent, two or more
years below grade level in basic academic skills, a
single parent or pregnant, and recurring medical,
psychological, or personal problems. Many states
mandated legislation, including Iowa (Iowa
Administrative Code, Chapter 281-12.5(13), Provision for
At-Risk Students), for serving the at-risk student in
which standards were set in identification, instruction,
support services, counseling, parent involvement, and

involvement and inservicing of all school personnel
(Department of Education, Division of Instructional
Services, 1989). As we continue towards the year 2000,
most educators believe, and statistics indicate that
twenty-five percent of Americans of the 17 and 18 year-
old population will fail to graduate from high school
with their age group (Gold, 1991). As the demographics
of the student population changes in America, the system
has become full of poorer, more ethnically diverse
children then ever before (Boyer, 1987). Not only will
we be dealing with linguistics as a handicap, but many
students are physically and mentally handicapped. This
has forced American education to change its methods and
offer alternatives to meet these new challenges.

The gap between the haves and the have-nots will
continue to widen as the population of America and the
schools change. As diverse groups begin to make a
larger impact on our schools, there will be a need to
meet their needs, many of which will have to be in forms
of alternative education. Administrators need to
prepare themselves and evaluate what strategies will
work with their target group remaining flexible (Antes &
Nardini, 1991). Metro High School in Cedar Rapids,

Iowa, offers a non-traditional education using creativity in helping at-risk students succeed and meet graduation requirements. The school's goals are to: promote a sound basis of skills and knowledge, development of life skills, explore career development, focus on citizenship, and offer opportunities for personal enrichment (Wilcynski, 1992). Metro offers unique programs called "Vocademics", which combines the study of vocational skills with the incorporation of academic skills.

Other schools and programs have developed across the nation with a variety of strategies to meet the needs of our changing populations. In Austin, Texas, at-risk students have created their own summer school curriculum (Cale 1992), in Medford, Massachusetts, they have introduced integrated curriculum of all subject matter with an emphasis on technology (Fillebrown-DiDomenico, 1992), and visionary educators like Ernest Boyer, have called for radical changes in our curriculum to better prepare our students for the real world (Brandt, 1988).

As I continue to prepare myself for that first position as administrator, I must be cautious of reform,

change, and restructuring movements and innovations.
Restructuring to meet the demands of our new student
population, I will have to explore the values and
principles of our new community. In planning to bring
change, educators must be involved at all levels,
considering the long range implications, and it should
reflect how students learn (Moore & Moore, 1993).
Again and again the research states that in order for a
school to restructure it must come from the inside out
(Clover & Goens, 1992). Transforming schools can only
occur when schools begin changing their context
dramatically, restructuring their organization, and
reassessing their values and principles. Taking what is
already being done in your school and making it better
(Goodlad, 1992), seems to be the stance taken by many
educational experts. Alternatives have to be made
available and the process of change must be dealt with
in a professional manner. The principal must be able to
effectively take bold initiatives and be totally
responsible for the program and its accountability. He
or she must surround themselves with outstanding staff
who have the ability to work with the target clientele.

The principal must secure funding to entice those
involved to be active participants in the program
(Kammoun, 1991).

Alternatives to public education may be too late in
coming to some areas of America. According to a recent
Gallop Poll, 70 percent of the respondents favored the
government allotting a certain amount of money to
American parents to send their children to the public,
private or parochial school of their choice (Kealey,
1992). This debate of school choice has opened up new
controversies, as we continue to fail in educating our
youth. Examine America and its major metropolitan areas
where discontent, frustration, and anger have already
set in over public education. Choice is the call word
for those who are in the lower economic classes, who
have seen first hand the effects of past alternatives
offered such as busing fail (Glazer). As our economic-
social structure continues to change in Iowa, so will
there be a severe discrepancy in the amount of money
spent on them. Choice is not the answer, monetary and
academic discrepancies will continue to grow along with
the concept of choice (Molnar, 1992). The gap between
the haves and the have-nots will continue to widen as

the population of our schools change. In order for school of choice to work, schools must design and plan with innovation and commitment. They must respond to the needs of the students and their parents and select focused themes that have meaning and will benefit the whole community (Raywid, 1992). School choice may open the door to some grassroot reforms, but as a principal, I must be able to see the equity and promises of autonomy to all those who participate, especially the student at-risk. How will I best serve them?

Conclusion

As I conclude my administrative belief paper, I can say I am excited, motivated, and changed. I am excited in that I have found new knowledge in the journal articles and books I have read these past two years, which have helped me solidify my thoughts and feelings. This newly acquired knowledge has filled many of the empty voids in my personal philosophy giving me new directions and confidence. I am excited because I have been forced to learn again, more then ever before, and realize that this hoop has been worth jumping through. Learning is indeed a life-long endeavor. Furthermore, this assignment has motivated me to the next plateau of

becoming an administrator. I now have a clearer
understanding for the reasons why I want to be a
principal. Those new ideas will help me create new
visions for the educational community in which I live.
Finally, I have changed. I have come to recognize many
of my weaknesses and realize there are many areas in
which I have to improve on if I am to become an
effective leader. In my heart I have found direction
for my passion. This passion has both feelings and
focus. Passion will always keep the students as the
most important ingredient in the recipe we call
education. A passion that will allow flexibility and
change to be a common experience in my life and my
school community. I believe this passion for the
student will guide the changes I attempt to make and be
the integral part of my administrative vision.

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