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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

As a requirement of the "Administration of the Elementary School Curriculum" course at the University of Northern Iowa, I began a journal of my perceptions and attitudes about becoming an elementary principal. A recurring theme in that journal was that of focus. Of particular interest to me was the difference between focusing on positive possibilities rather than negative dead ends. One thing of which I am aware is that I find myself repeating in many different ways and in many different situations the idea of doing the very best I can with what I have, and not complaining about what I don't have or can't control. Other related ideas in the journal deal with using the correct tool for the job, whether it's a work of art or a teaching strategy.

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

Faye M. Thompson

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has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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As a requirement of the “Administration of the Elementary School Curriculum” course at the University of Northern Iowa, I began a journal of my perceptions and attitudes about becoming an elementary principal. A recurring theme in that journal was that of focus. Of particular interest to me was the difference between focusing on positive possibilities rather than negative dead ends. One thing of which I am aware is that I find myself repeating in many different ways and in many different situations the idea of doing the very best I can with what I have, and not complaining about what I don’t have or can’t control. Other related ideas in the journal deal with using the correct tool for the job, whether it’s a work of art or a teaching strategy.

Stephen R. Covey (1989), talks about the same point of view. His theory describes a Circle of Control and Circle of Influence. He discusses the idea that there are some things over which we have no real control and other things that we can do something about. By determining in which of these two circles we focus most of our time and energy, we can discover much about the degree of our proactivity. Proactive people focus their efforts related to the Circle of Influence (e.g., brainstorming and finding creative answers to questions). Reactive people focus on the Circle of Concern (e.g., things to blame, people to accuse, and feelings of victimization), thus causing their circle of influence to shrink.

Having the correct positive focus is an overriding principle for success in an administrative career. To examine the direction this

positive focus will take, you must examine your personal values and perspectives.

Personal Values

There is within each person a tightly constructed core of values, as well as a more loosely structured one. Sergiovanni (1987) writes about the flexibility and resiliency within the framework of tight or loose values. The tightly constructed core contains the uncompromising values that I hold which guide and direct my actions and beliefs. The less structured one is made up of values that might need to be compromised occasionally if I believe the end justifies it. My loosely structured core of beliefs changes when I learn new information, but my basic inner core of beliefs develop over a lifetime. They do not yield to compromise, but grow and develop continuously.

Faith, Future and Spiritual Needs

My personal inner core of values flows from my faith in a personal, triune God. I believe that I was created in His image and live on this earth to serve and to grow in accordance with His will. This belief is at the heart of those values I rely upon in everyday decision making.

Real meaning in life comes from having emotional and spiritual needs met as well. I believe that fulfillment comes from how closely aligned values and needs are, and how successful a person is at directing his/her actions according to identified needs and values. The apostle Paul pointed out in Romans 7:19 that "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do." Throughout history people

have felt frustration when their actions were not in line with their values, beliefs, and needs.

Clark (1992) reported the educational implications of aligning needs, values and beliefs when discussing the second annual strategic planning session of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). These administrators felt that by identifying customers or stakeholders and their needs they gained a fresh perspective on their mission. As a result, they completely rewrote their goals focusing on key indicators of stakeholder behavior. The AASA agreed that new strategies required them to practice identification of needs internally and externally.

While evaluating my personal values, I used Foundations for Personal Leadership (Yockstick, Tripp and Blehm, 1992) as a guide for my analysis. These authors point to the gifts one ought to consider when looking at personal perspectives and values. These gifts include life, choice, partnerships, and being heard and understood. The gift of life is concerned with looking at your past, present, and future situations in order to bring to light some of your own inner core.

I have always had an excitement about the future. In fact, I have often wondered how old I might be before looking fondly backward more frequently than excitedly forward. I still do not know the answer to that question, but have come to believe that looking forward in a positive manner is one of my most basic values. I feel that time spent focusing on what can be accomplished is of greater value than time spent looking for excuses and scapegoats to blame for things not going well. There may

be frustrating circumstances when some situations are out of my control, but my focus must stay with the possibilities for positive change, rather than dwelling on negative stalemates.

Choice

Another core value is that of choice. As an art specialist, I have focused a lot of attention on creative thinking and the process of choosing from among a variety of options. Failing to consider every possible option results in settling for less than the best idea available. Brainstorming is the first step in the creative thinking process (Margulies 1991).

Earlier this year a motivational speaker, John Crudele (presentation, February 15, 1993), addressed a group of Waverly-Shell Rock Junior High students and repeatedly reminded them that choices to use liquor, tobacco, and drugs ultimately limited their options. To impress upon them the impact of youthful choices, he used a metaphor which compared a beautiful cake with fluffy icing upon which a little salt was spilled to choosing to drink as an adult. Choosing to drink as a youth, however, was likened to the cake being baked with salt instead of flour. The resulting damage is beyond external fixing.

Relationships

Another core value is that of relationships. Like fine arts, relationships give meaning to existence. They come in all forms, from professional and collegial ones to those special partnerships involving the deep love and trust of a spouse. Relationships require that you be a good listener providing the other person with the gift of being heard and

understood, as the basic foundation for mutual respect and support. Only then can you care and nurture one another so that you can grow to be the best that each can be, both personally and professionally.

Trust

Trust is essential in the development of all partnerships or relationships with others. Honesty and openness in a relationship are important to the development of trust. If an individual cannot, or will not, be straightforward and honest in every situation, there is nothing upon which to build trust. Without trust, there is little one can accomplish except to play guessing games.

Humor

Humor is important because it diffuses tension. Work often will create tension, and humor is a valve that will release some pressure so tasks may be effectively accomplished. Humor also helps put things into perspective when they get out of focus.

New Challenges

As a personal growth value, I have always enjoyed new challenges along with the completion of tasks. Whether figuring out a difficult knitting pattern, capturing the likeness of a friend in a portrait, or working toward an academic degree, I have always enjoyed the process, as well as the ultimate feeling of accomplishment. It is important to have both short and long term goals, and to recognize that some things are never really finished. One of the important components of quality

transformation, which is discussed later in this paper, is the idea of continuous improvement (Leddick, 1992).

Financial

When considering my financial values, I again equate personal and professional goal setting similarly. Both require planning by articulating needs. Both require gathering input from those affected by the plan, and both may benefit from creative use of resources. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), "Sound fiscal management begins with the establishment of program goals and objectives" (1991, p. 17). The way in which I approach my personal planning for future security will be reflected in my concern for budget planning in the principalship.

Leisure, Fun and Play

Yockstick's et al. (1992) suggestion to evaluate the value of leisure, fun and play, seemed (at first) to be of less importance than other values. However, leisure and play are vital to continuous physical, mental, and spiritual health and welfare. Like humor, leisure is a necessary valve for release of tension. Also like humor, leisure, play or fun can remove one from the intensity of a situation and allow for another perspective. Nicholas Roukes (1988), in reference to creative problem solving, suggests that one needs to allow time and space away from the concern to achieve a truly enlightened insight. Roukes goes on to suggest that the "synectic think cycle" (p. 22) involves the 3 R's of refer,

reflect, and reconstruct. The reflect part of the cycle requires an incubation period which is best facilitated by leisure time.

As a principal, I will consider the importance of leisure and humor in the lives of school stakeholders. There will be times when I will need to allow staff, students, teachers and parents to enjoy a relaxed atmosphere of getting to know one another in a setting less formal than that ordinarily in existence. For example, I would consider it appropriate to celebrate the beginning of the school year with an informal picnic. New staff members could be introduced and given the opportunity to become acquainted with everyone.

Community, Society, and World

The final personal value category is Yockstick's et al. (1992) community, society, and world. I feel these are all extensions of relationships, and are to be valued as a single unit. If honesty and openness is valued in a relationship of two people, it is also to be valued in relationships involving a multitude of people. Leaders of free nations vie for votes by promising people that which seems to be in demand. People who elect leaders feel cheated if promises turn to excuses.

I also regard highly the ability to compromise. Too often gridlock sets in when individuals refuse to remove their blinders of political partisanship and view problems from different perspectives. As a community, schools need to have leaders who value honesty, openness and a willingness to look at problems from more than one perspective. In the school setting there are increasing numbers of perspectives to be

considered when looking at any problem or situation. There are many methods of incorporating numerous perspectives for strategic planning or program evaluation.

According to Bonstingl (1992), the fishbone, or Ishikawa diagram is often used to help determine causes and effects within an organization's systems. It can be used to identify factors responsible for a problem or to plan a process more effectively. The key to using the fishbone diagram is to include all possible related parts of the problem or condition being studied.

I have been considering my personal values, both those I see as deeply rooted core values and those which are more likely to be compromised for the common good. Next I will consider how these values and beliefs fit into my vision for professional performance as a principal.

Professional Vision

Role Model

I believe it is important to see myself, and to be seen by others, as a positive role model. To exemplify this value, I must become proactive in my approach to problem solving and not just reactive. In Proficiencies for Principals, the NAESP (1991), points out that a positive image is a crucial first step in creating a high quality educational program. The authors discuss opportunities to be proactive in the statement, "Proficient principals capitalize on such encounters [interacting with diverse groups of people in various settings] to highlight student achievements,

underscore the school's mission, and honestly and openly address questions and problems" (p. 3).

Shared Decision Making

Ken Michaels (1988) refers to "second-wave reform," as he talks about the necessity of examining our basic philosophical beliefs and developing new belief systems. One of these new beliefs he refers to is the development of a collegial, participatory environment among both students and staff. I believe that many current successes in schools and in businesses are the result of a major change in leadership style from that of top down to that of bottom up.

One of the key components of Total Quality is that of site-based management, which involves shared decision making. According to Gabor and Meunier (1993), these strategies only work if used successfully by leaders who understand and are learning from the school as an organization. They point out that using vision and values is an important basis for empowering people to make meaningful improvements and manage their own leadership systems. They go on to say that educational leaders must be aware of the interconnected relationship of all the people and processes within the organizational system.

Jerry Herman (1992) talks about the important links between process and product. He believes that the quality approach has an "educational fit" (p. 96), pointing out that if school districts approach the development of processes to deliver products by relying on a team or

family approach, these teams or families need to be empowered to make decisions which were previously made only by administrators or boards of education.

Staff Development

As a principal addressing the priorities of restructuring, I will be concerned about finding the best inservice programs available. My school district may be investing a great deal of money for the inservicing of staff. There can be a tremendous waste of resources if programs that are touted to be the salvation of American education turn out to be of value only due to the Hawthorne effect.

As I considered Covey's (1989) circles of influence and control, I am reminded of the way in which we currently focus our evaluation efforts both with students and teachers. Glasser (1990) writes about an educational system in which "students are made aware in a wide variety of coercive ways that the low quality work that is measured by machines is the top administrative priority in almost all school systems" (p. 1). Glasser goes on to illustrate how Deming's methods (cited by Walton, 1986) are indeed very different from current school management practices in that they focus on the sphere of influence rather than that of control. W. Edwards Deming, a founder of Total Quality Management (TQM), (Walton, 1986) presents a common sense approach for interpersonal relationships and planned continuous change that appeals to my inner core belief of the value of honesty and openness. This focus

also lines up with my value of positive proactivism, as opposed to negative reaction.

In my own research conducted at three Iowa schools during the Spring of 1993, I found that teachers in all three communities concurred that there was an important relationship between inservice training and quality educational programs. Of the five categories covered by a questionnaire, the employee training category showed the most consistent gap between what participants felt was happening and what they thought should be happening.

Continuous Improvement

Susan B. Leddick (1992), outlines a seven step process borrowing from W. Edward Deming's Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle (Walton, 1986). Much of her outline deals with the concept of continuous improvement. The third step focuses on generating improvement theories. I believe that teachers concerned about evaluation procedures will respond favorably to a plan of self evaluation based on identifying their own strengths and areas needing improvement. This keeps a positive focus and allows administrators and teachers to see problems as opportunities for improvement. Whether applied to teacher evaluation or office procedures, continuous progress should be monitored for ways to improve. If creative thinking is valued, the status quo will continuously be questioned.

Shared Vision

Mike Cohen (cited in Brandt, 1991) talks about the issues involved in restructuring. Cohen identifies assessment, accountability, and managing change as issues common to the states in the National Alliance for Restructuring Education. He sees outcome, or goal based direction being at the heart of restructuring. Again I see the idea of having a vision common to those involved, and focusing on it as a guide in decision making.

Since A Nation at Risk was written 10 years ago there has been a growing concern that the educational reforms of the last decade have been pretty much a waste of time and money. It is apparent that there are calls for major changes. Terrel H. Bell (1993) talks about the problems faced by education today being more a result of "the quality of student's lives outside of school and erosion of parental support and community interest," (p. 59) rather than what is or is not happening in schools. If this is true, then school administrators need to face the idea that the process of educating is not just a nine to five job. We need to value shared goals. Parents cannot be ignored or invited to school only once a year for a special program. There needs to be a cooperative effort among all stakeholders to do the job of educating.

Yockstick et al. (1992) quotes Alexander Graham Bell as saying:

What this power is I cannot say; all I know is that it exists and it becomes available only when a man is in that state of mind in which he knows exactly what he

wants and is fully determined not to quit until he finds it. (p. 1-4).

In other words, to have power one needs to have a vision which is driven by values.

The vision is thought of as a picture of where an organization will be in three to five years. "A compelling vision is understood and subscribed to by all employees" (Gabor and Meunier, 1993, p. 100). Values are the way everyone will work together to attain the vision.

As a potential principal, my vision would be to make a positive difference in the lives of students. I can only do that through those who have meaningful and continuous contact with the children. Therefore it would be necessary for me to work with parents, teachers and all other school employees who have contact with the children, whose futures would be entrusted to my leadership. It is essential that students, parents, teachers, and other employees see themselves as having something to gain from participation in the process. They all must share the same vision.

The above mentioned customers or stakeholders need to take part in the development of the shared vision for them to take ownership of the process. A vision is not something that an administrator mandates and points to on an overhead and expects everyone to internalize. No matter how brilliantly conceived or well stated the vision may be, all stakeholders must be involved in the development of the vision (Senge, 1990).

The process of developing a common vision begins with consensus gathering in small groups where people feel comfortable about sharing their ideas and are willing to discuss what is best for the students. The groups begin working together, seeing that they are headed in the same direction, and sharing the same values. Only then can they internalize the vision. Every act and decision should be experienced as part of the process of growing toward something together.

Real empowerment also involves synergy, which is a sharing, or coming together. In the fine arts, the term "synectics" is used to describe what happens in creative thinking. It comes from the Greek Word, "synektikos," which means "bringing forth together," or "bringing different things into unified connection" (Roukes, 1988, p. 11).

Summary

Were I to assume the role of a principal tomorrow, I would begin by evaluating the existing programs. Evaluation would be an ongoing process. My first concern would be to determine if there was a mission statement currently in existence, and if it was being acted upon and used in establishing policy.

If there was no vision statement, I would begin to schedule strategic planning sessions where small groups could meet. We would include students, parents, other staff, and community representatives. On the other hand, if a mission statement existed but was not being acted upon, I would find out why. If it was outdated, we would begin again. If it had been recently adopted, but the teachers and other stakeholders felt

no allegiance to it, we would also begin again. As pointed out earlier, it is critical that all who are important to the vision are included in its conception.

Each time a decision is to be made, the vision statement would be used as a measuring stick against which the decision would have to fit or make sense. When a decision is made to compromise, it is necessary to justify the expected results in keeping with the vision.

My professional vision lists shared decision making, staff development, continuous improvement, and shared vision as important components in achieving success as an administrator. These are all part of the philosophy referred to as Total Quality Management (TQM). I feel that TQM training would be a valuable resource for all the stakeholders in education, and would be a sound investment as a staff development option. This is the philosophy and principle that helped transform Japan's manufacturing policies and image from "shoddy and cheap" to "quality for less." American companies have recently had similar successful transformations (Barrier, 1992).

W. Edwards Deming developed principles and a philosophy which are being seriously considered in education (Walton, 1986). Numbers of Iowa schools, AEA's and community colleges have trained some of their staff in Total Quality Transformation (TQT) as it has been renamed in Iowa Education. Statewide to date, 4 of the 15 merged areas in Iowa have formed a Quality Coalition in which the local college, local school

district, AEA, and local businesses combine their efforts in continuous planned transformation (Lynch, 1992).

A reference is made in my journal about comparing the role of the administrator to that of the producer, director, player, coach, chief executive officer, orchestra conductor, visual artist, and shepherd. It is necessary for people in these positions to focus on a vision of what they wish to accomplish, whether it is an artistic performance, work of art, competitive sport, deal to be negotiated, or flock to be led. If any of these chooses to focus on the difficulties or road blocks in their way, they will not be as effective as they could be. Each will necessarily acknowledge that there are difficulties to be overcome in order to reach the goal, but instead of looking for excuses, they will be actively searching out methods of overcoming the difficulties.

Successful people work together with others synergistically. Covey (1991) illustrates this by relating the story of two Harvard professors who share an office. One wanted the window open, and the other shut. Instead of assuming two opposing positions as usually happens when two people have differences of opinion as to what is best, the two asked themselves "What can we do that would give the fresh air without the draft?" They dealt with the problem as two creative people who have respect for each other and who understand each other's needs. As a result they decided to open the window in the next room and rearrange the furniture. They looked for new alternatives because they were not

focused on defending their positions, but rather looking for solutions. This kind of problem solving is often referred to as the win-win solution.

When values appear to be in conflict it does not necessarily mean that there must be a winner and loser. As a principal there will be occasions when I will need to mediate differences of opinions or values. I expect to rely on the vision of the school and the core values of the best methods of meeting the educational needs of students. I will also be relying on my own core values and dealing with the importance of compromise.

I conclude with once again affirming that the paramount consideration in successful administration lies in knowing which values are fixed at the inner core and which are open to compromise. Only a clear statement of vision can determine where to draw that line. This vision must be developed by group consensus among all stakeholders. There must be a written statement of mission, and a plan to keep focused on the specific goals outlined by the mission. There will be a realization of the process of striving toward continuous improvement, not a final attainment thereof.

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