Conversations with Principals:

Issues, Values, and Politics
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Abstract: **Conversations With Principals: Issues, Values, and Politics***, is a unique compilation of interviews with principals at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels. This book allows the readers the unusual opportunity to experience the inner voice of principals as they discuss the many decisions they make and the multitude of people they must engage. The professional background of each principal is given so educators can better understand their journey to leadership positions.*

How do educational administration programs provide the critical academic environment to adequately prepare educational leaders for our K-12 school? What type of content and pedagogy is most effective in communicating the reality of the school environment, that is, assuming a leadership position which coordinates and directs the activities of our educational institutions? To what extent do their personal and ethical judgments impact these decisions and how do we instill these critical leadership traits in preparation programs? These questions have been paramount in administrative programs and have initiated the research

in which I have been involved over the past several years. The following excerpts from my book, *Conversations with Principals: Issues, Values and Politics*, convey the inner thinking of elementary, middle, and secondary school leaders in their conversations with me, in order to bring that school reality to the graduate institution for leadership preparation.

Introduction

The Role of the Principal

The most common community center, institutional organization, bastion of cultural understanding that we all hold as part of our collective traditional heritage, is the public school. It is perceived to be the most understood institution. We have lived, breathed, and grown together through this national institution. It has been, continues, and will always be, the focal point for personal and professional development for our citizenry, responsible for effectively maintaining and perpetuating our collective democratic vision while evolving and incorporating a changing and growing population. It involves all human dynamics, social and organizational structures and environmental features. It embraces all disciplines of the soft and hard sciences and increasingly engages the international world around us. And, it is the principal, and no one else, who ultimately assumes the responsibility for the school's effectiveness.

Yet, when one considers the all transcending and perceived under-standings we all share, there is no document, no blueprint, no formula from which we can draw that provides a roadmap for an effective educational process in all situations. It is no wonder that we are always in a quandary as to the reasons for our educational system to be so problematic, and also infinitely successful. It speaks clearly to the complexity of the schooling enterprise and the enormous influence of the principal.

Within this context, it is the principal who is the critical person orchestrating the movements of all the players in the school. The principal makes the decisions that affect people's lives, directs consider-able sums of money, creates a climate that affects the community and projects the appropriate philosophy and practical vision that propels a school forward. The principal, in essence, is a critical player in balancing and promoting the progress of our society.

These leaders coordinate and direct a system whose purpose offers the paradox of creating innovation and movement toward the develop-ment of human behavior, intellectual and physical prowess, as well as instilling socially acceptable moral and ethical values. These school leaders are responsible for initiating a progressive, fluid and responsive organizational system while maintaining its steady state, reflecting

stability and equilibrium necessary to maintain the current moment in time. Educational leaders are without question, as important a professional group of contributing members of our society as any. They face the daunting task of overseeing, directing and protecting the lives our children within our schools.

Schools have the companion responsibility of developing young people's capabilities while socializing them to conform to societal needs and expectations. In order to accomplish this Herculean task, extraordinary leadership is required. How does leadership actually function at the school site? What types of real decisions are a part of their daily experiences? How do they make these decisions? A review of the literature in educational administration will reveal volumes of conceptual material in large part that attempts to present all the component parts that underscore the rationale behind leadership behavior. This theoretical underpinning is essential in providing students of the discipline, a grasp of the larger picture; the modus operandi for the craft of school leadership.

While all of us have had a range of experiences within the school, either as a student, parent, educator or community member, unless you have assumed the leadership of a school, it is difficult to understand what is involved in taking on this role.

Connecting the Principal to the Reader

An extremely effective and potent method of understanding this professional discipline is eliciting commentary from those in the school positions, the principals themselves. In *Conversations with Principals: Issues, Values and Politics*, I have had direct discussions with the principals, which offer a clear and cogent connection between the actual school leadership setting to the reader, thus capturing the irrefutable and pure reality of the experience. This was a personal dialogue between the principals and me.

While case study presentations are very effective in capturing the realities of the site experiences, it is presented from the standpoint of the writer, and therefore has been somewhat skewed and unavoidably interpreted before the reader has an opportunity to assess the case personally. A verbatim exchange between interviewer and interviewee presents the situation with virtually no prejudice or bias and thus open to the interpretation of the reader. It is a pure account of the principal's experience, thinking and reflection.

Having taught educational administration for over twenty-five years and worked as an administrator on virtually every leadership level

nationally and internationally, I have found that the stronger the connection between the reality setting, i.e., the school, to the academic classroom, the think tank, the more potent the information and worthwhile the experience and preparation for the student. That is why the pedagogy of *Conversations*, is so effective in the graduate classroom. Without exception, students feel that they know the principal, understand what they are experiencing and are more understanding and sensitive to the considerable demands required of the position.

How the Principal Interviews Were Formulated

As I mentioned in my opening comments, my initial objective was to develop the connection between the students of leadership to those practicing in the field.

The principals were randomly selected and representative rather than exemplary, although some of the more experienced principals I interviewed had been award winners. They all wanted to make a contribution to the field and arranged their schedules so that the interviews were conducted when they were not preoccupied with school matters. Some interviews were phone interviews, others in person; some during the week, others on weekends. All the interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed for analysis. They were told that the information would be treated anonymously, and in some instances changed somewhat, to further maintain confidentiality. They all had an opportunity to read and edit their interviews.

When I first approached them, I also indicated that I wanted honest comments, feedback that would reflect and capture their experiences in the schools. I requested that they not hesitate to cite political, emotional, social or otherwise controversial issues that generally might cause inhibition and restraint. It was their candor that would be so important and potent in conveying their positions and experiences as principals.

In each interview, a structured interview schedule was utilized with probe questions. A purposive sample was selected because I intended to represent a wide variety of levels, experiences and backgrounds, hence the qualitative nature of the research.

The demographic information about each principal presented in the beginning of the chapters as well as the series of initial questions focused on their backgrounds, was particularly useful in developing a general profile about the principals, i.e., experience in teaching, prior administrative work, types of previous schools, his/her age, etc. I have found that graduate students need this information in order to compare their professional and personal situation to those who are assuming the role

of the principalship. It provides a very important point of reference as they consider their career paths, background and timing. It also helps them better understand that particular principal as he/she is involved at, and responds to, that specific school site and situation.

Organization of the Book

Each interview in this book conveys a different school experience. While there are administrative connections throughout each interview, as one might expect given the discipline and applied skills, there are distinct differences as well. While, on the one hand, it is important to identify those characteristics that each leader must possess, evidenced by their comments, there is rich data that makes each experience different and unique to that particular individual and site. This demonstrates the complexity of the profession and breathes life into the prospects that each individual can apply his or her particular print on an organizational situation. That specific vision or philosophy has power and is real. Candidates soon discover that principals can make a difference.

The elementary principals, while representing the same grade level student age populations, deal with different organizational issues and utilize distinct leadership styles. These school levels are highlighted in order to demonstrate the uniqueness of each school situation while also capturing the overlap of elementary demands and expectations. This reflects the complexity of the schooling enterprise and also emphasizes the leader's role and contribution to his or her school. Specifically, each elementary principal reflected his/her own personality and particular school need in the following ways; systematized testing and uniformity in the curriculum; community dysfunction and staff alienation; maintaining stability and consistency; creating equilibrium and predictability and, finally, utilizing personal "gut" feelings as a part of the decision-making formula.

The middle school principals rather dramatically delineated the very distinct leadership orientations that drove their decision-making and defined their schools. On the one hand, while politics was the significant thread that linked the schools together, the particular school ethos and backdrop that affected the middle school principal's leadership and application to their schools was wholly different. Emphasis on board encroachment, committee shared decision-making and focused planning all were part of these respective schools as indicated by these interviews. While politics were a part of all the school processes, each was specific to the school site.

Lastly, the high school interviews were still another vehicle of

consistency and idiosyncratic to the respective schools. And again, the school ranged from international students and cultural issues to continuation schools and organizational coherence and grounding necessary for management control and authority.

The titles of the leaders were designed to more easily identify the more salient aspects of the personality and issues derived from the interviews. While other titles could likely describe these principals as well, these were selected in the attempt to capture the issue, and more easily identify the school.

The pedagogy that follows each interview asks the reader to think very carefully and substantively about the interview. It also asks to be more actively involved so that the reader is engaged on a cognitive and visceral level. It is extremely important to exercise a physical practice as part of the development of leadership abilities. How you behave, i.e., your comments, movement, interactive skills, etc., must be practiced. Language, voice, diction, and general physical presence requires training.

The following excerpts are of conversations I had with three of the principals at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The first was with a newly appointed elementary principal. The second was an award-winning middle school principal, and the third an experienced high school principal. Information regarding the culture of the schools, the background of each administrator and the foci of the chapters are indicated.

Part I: Chapter I. "The Community Activist"

Elementary School

CHANGING THE SCHOOL CULTURE:

Instilling a sense of pride, respect and hope for students, faculty and community is the focus of this chapter. How can students be reoriented to think they are capable and cared for when schools have been unsupportive throughout their school experiences? How can teachers begin to contribute their talents and energies to schools that have been unresponsive and authoritative in the decision-making process? What are effective strategies that can be utilized by principals to "meet students and faculty where they are" in order to change a school and create a healthy and positive school environment?

Themes addressed in this chapter:

● Creating school pride

● Developing shared decision-making

● Acknowledging success

- Overcoming obstacles and roadblocks

- Remaining positive and projecting leadership stability

- Being consistent

The Community Activist

We were standing around talking, speaking Spanish and finally ended up talking about why the kids in our school were not succeeding…really a very deep dialogue. It happens all the time. People come and sit in my office and they comment, 'when have I ever done this'?

These kids don't have a tomorrow. The cost of failure is so high. It's so urgent. It's a whole prison population is what it is. I struggle with that everyday.

I often ask the mom what type of support she has for her child so I can advocate for her. She may be a single mom or whatever; so I continually ask what I can do to help. Half the time when I stay late, I call parents and I make it a point of telling them something that their child did that was good."

…I often go over to their houses. I drive right over to their houses… People ask me how I feel. I tell you that I love it. I absolutely love it. People are so surprised! Well, you know…I consider myself a very positive person and personality. I've taken to it like a fish to water however daunting as this school is, and as much as I had great reservations initially, I am in the right place.

Principal:
>   Ethnicity: Latina, female
>   Age: 45+ years
>   Experience: 1st year Principal; 1 year Intern Assistant Principal; 3
>   years related administrative experience
>   School: Elementary School
>   Student Population: 500 students

School Context

All new principals have the daunting responsibility of providing effective leadership, relevant to their constituents, while, at the same time, first learning about their school needs. This is a very complex dichotomy for any new leader and requires immediate yet measured action. On the one hand, a leader must move deliberately so that she can make thoughtful and effective decisions but, on the other hand, be immediately responsive to the situation. First impressions are quite powerful and affect perception, which can remain over a long period of

time. Our newly hired principal in this Elementary School assumed the principalship in the wake of a principal who was unable to relate to her parent community and also unresponsive to her faculty, causing her to encounter considerable resistance.

The school was located in an inner city environment where high crime rates, and the prevalence of drugs and gang related problems were ever-present. This was her first principal position. Prior to this assignment, she had been an administrative intern in a high achieving school with a very seasoned and successful principal as her model.

This chapter example addresses the reality of the principalship in this particular setting. Moreover, it speaks to the type of moral and ethical dilemmas endemic to inner city schools that have enormous impact on the leadership skills of the principal. By offering this information and "conversation" to students pursuing leadership careers, they become immediately engaged in the experience of leadership on the front line. They are asked to think very deeply about their skills, motivations and commitment to this challenging professional pursuit within the relative safety of the graduate setting.

Part II: Chapter 6. " The Sage"

Middle School

LEADERSHIP FOCUS AND PLANNING

Preparing to assume the principalship of a school requires considerable planning. Conferencing with your faculty, staff and parent constituencies in order to develop professional and personal relationships as well as to identify school needs as perceived by these critical groups is extremely important. How can a principal demonstrate respect for the history and traditions of the school, support the wishes of the school community, and still incorporate her leadership philosophy and vision for the school? This principal demonstrated such leadership skill in a very unique way. Her approach set the tone for a very successful and positive first school year.

Themes addressed in this chapter:

- Preparation for relationship building

- Personalizing the school environment

- Short and long term planning for program development

- Visibility and availability

- Community outreach

- Financial support

The Sage

Well, the very first priority was to build trust into the administration, team building. I am a team builder. There was a lot of healing that had to go on. The last year with the former principal, the staff was very divided. You were either pro administration or anti administration. There were many cliques…I walked in and I had to do my homework very quickly, i.e., team building and looking at what … community services the school already had.

I then started prioritizing … I came to school the entire month of July just to familiarize myself with the school … The next thing I wanted to do was to meet the staff, and meet them one-on-one. So I also wrote a letter to them introducing myself, my background, my experience and asked them to give me their resumes. I wanted a history about their experiences at the school; what committees they had served on; what their goals were for next year…what administrative support they expected. I mentioned that I would be in school beginning August 6th and for them to give me 15 minutes to one half hour, to meet with them … so we could get to know one another… I had a one-to-one conversation with every staff member before the opening of school. That was a very eye opening and wonderful experience …

I always interacted with all the children. I personally, well, I am blessed to have a memory for names and so prior to the opening of school, I took the yearbook out and placed all the children's pictures on 3 by 5 cards. I knew at least 150 faces. I knew their names before the opening of school so that I could interact with them. I could go up to all the children and introduce myself …That also was very important to me."

You also need a communication support system; a colleague. There's nobody that understands the role of the principal except a principal. One day I could be mopping the floor and cleaning the toilet and the next day I could be making a presentation to the Board of Directors. The job is indescribable. You need to have a colleague and a friend who you could call up and cry, scream and ask for help; someone to support you.

Another thing, do your homework. Ask questions. Get to know who in your district can support and help you; who in central office or support staff or what is available. It is a never ending job. That's what I say to those who are new or 2 or 3 years down the road. Know how to manage your time and balance yourself.

And do have another life after school.

Principal:
    Ethnicity: Asian female
    Age: 50+ years
    Experience: 5 years Principal; 3 Assistant Principal; 5+years related
        administrative experience
    School: Middle School
    Student Population: 570 students

School Context

All experienced educators and school leaders must adapt their skills to meet the specific needs of the school. This veteran and highly experienced principal entered her first year in the principalship with particular focus on understanding her school ethos and history. It is quite clear from her interview that she grasped the demands of her faculty and staff. She also knew that, while working with her staff, she could not compromise her essential mission, supporting the needs of the students. While she anticipated a certain degree of resistance, she successfully created an environment that helped diffuse that resistance. She personalized her relationships with her teachers by researching the school background and history regarding grants, foundations, committees and parent involvement. She prepared to meet and connect with her student body by spending her summer familiarizing herself with her student population. This typified her leadership style and was indicative of a school leader who was focused, energized and involved. This approach and the impressions it created were quite powerful and had a lasting impact on her staff and community during her tenure as Principal.

Part III: Chapter 9. "The Multi-Tasker"

High school

PERCEPTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The perceptions and assumptions held by the leadership of a school dramatically affect the school climate and have a direct bearing on the willingness for faculty to participate in school functions and activities. How the leader of the school feels about her faculty determines the working environment. What decisions can she make that inspires volunteerism, improves attendance, motivates and develops teacher professionalism, and heightens faculty morale in order for them to "go the extra mile" on behalf of the school?

Themes addressed in this chapter:

• Assumptions and attitudes about faculty and students

- Gradual changes in school decision-making

- Structural support for students and faculty

- Short and long term planning

- School and community interaction

The Multi-Tasker

You go through this incredible interview and then you're hired, you're anointed, you're the principal. Then, there you are, alone. You are the leader; the curriculum leader, the visionary, the person who is going to make decisions about people's lives. The buck stops with you on every-thing. You're supposed to have the time and knowledge to know how to solve all of this and you don't … It's ok to be a learner in this struggle and just admit it. Then, work to make it different.

I think that there are only a few decisions that you have to make on the turn of the dime. Because someone comes into your office and lays a problem down, does not mean that you have to give an answer. There's always the feeling that you have to fix it. And, your tendency is to say, OK, we'll do this, because that's the position you've been put in. What I've learned, is that I rarely respond by saying, let's do this. Now, I say, what would you like from me? What do you think we should do? Often, they already know. They have a better feel for the problem and the solution than you do.

In a way, I see that I do a considerable amount of personnel management; and listening to everyone's moans and groans; keeping people calm and centered, if you will … getting rid of things that get in their way in order for them to continue focused. Sometimes I feel as though I'm more of a therapist that a principal. I spend a lot of time doing that. I don't think that that's bad; that's why it moves.

Principal
    Ethnicity: Caucasian, female
    Age: 50 years
    Experience: 3 years Principal; 6 years Assistant Principal; 3 years
        related administrative experience
    School: Continuation High School
    Student Population: 250 students

School Context

Principals of Continuation Schools have a different mandate as they assume a leadership role in a school. They are working with a population

of students who have not been successful in regular schooling environments. They have not demonstrated an ability to perform effectively in the mainstream, academically or behaviorally. For this reason, Continuation High School principals have to provide a different and more structured type of leadership. The Continuation School identified in this interview, had a limited student enrollment of approximately 250. Because of their unusual backgrounds, the principal approached her position by balancing the academic expectations of the high school, i.e. district and state goals and objectives, with a nurturing yet structured support system. She also had a strong background in the field; having been a teacher and high school assistant principal prior to assuming the principalship of this school.

The school was located in a suburban neighborhood. While test scores were quite low, as one might expect from students who have had histories of significant school issues, emphasis was still placed on achievement. It was a very important factor that drove many of the school initiatives.

A Final Thought

The preparation of educational leaders is a daunting yet crucial undertaking. This synthesis of a few of the principal interviews conducted and analyzed in *Conversations* provides an enlightening window into their professional experiences, lives and decision-making approaches. These conversations connect and, almost through osmosis, mentor the aspiring educational leaders to understand the demands, complexity and impact of school leadership. Through these principals' "inner voices," candidates can become more sensitized and prepared to assume decision-making roles in our K-12 schools. Finally, the ISLLC Standards as well as information regarding "No Child Left Behind" legislation is addressed in several interviews to better inform aspiring and current administrators of the impact these policies have on their leadership practices.

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